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AUGUST

THE LONGHORN CHARGE

by H. Andy Huff

LOBO'S RETURN

by E. E. Clement

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LATER
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...AND HE USED TO BE SO SKINNY!
WHAT A MAN!

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ALL STORIES BRAND NEW

DOUBLE-ACTION WESTERN

Volume 24 August, 1957 Number 6

Featured Novel

LOBO'S RETURN

by E. E. Clement **6**

He'd been guilty of train-robbery, and other acts of banditry, but Chad Browning had never killed anyone. Nevertheless, even though he'd been sent to prison for murder, Chad was willing to forget and forgive as he tried to start a new life. But others wouldn't forget . . .

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ROBERT A. W. LOWNDES, *Editor* MARIE ANTOINETTE PARK, *Asso. Ed.*

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He'd been innocent of the specific charge of which they convicted him, but that was all in the past. Chad Browning came home to forget and start afresh. — But one man wouldn't let him forget — one man who'd been there the night the sheriff was murdered . . .

LOBO'S RETURN

Novel of Justice Deferred

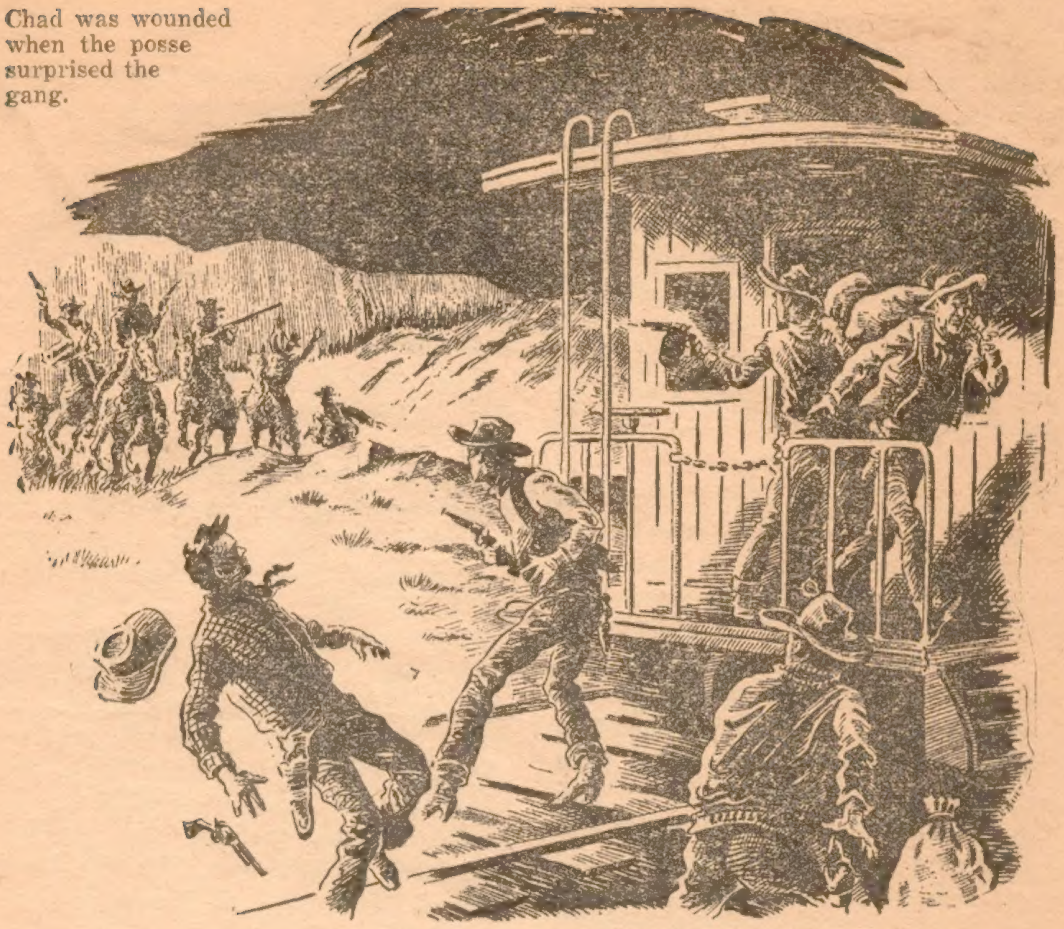
by E. E. Clement

HE WAS weary and saddle-sore, drooping in his saddle with fatigue, until he passed the rock with the Indian scratchings on it, and remembering how he'd played hide-and-seek and owlhooters-and-lawmen by it when he was a boy, remembered the kids he'd once played with. Chad Browning had come a long way in a long time.

It was many years since he'd seen this country which had been his childhood home, and the years between had seen him grow up from a wild impulsive boy to a bitter, hard-thinking, fast-shooting iron rod of a man who'd learned his experience in the hard school of life. He remembered the bitter ride in the railroad car, with two armed Sheriff's deputies, that had carried him away to the fortress jail at Yuma to serve his five-year sentence. He'd been a day over twenty-one then; now he was thirty-two.

Riding through this country was satisfying a deep-seated urge inside him, a longing that had made him return to the country that had made him and shamed him, a longing which he couldn't find words to define. The familiar, lush grass, the flowers growing wild in the meadows, the craggy tops and the pinon covered slopes of the mountains, brightened his eyes. He gazed at the landscape, noting this that was timeless, and that other which had changed with the passing of years.

He rode on over the well-beaten



Chad was wounded when the posse surprised the gang.

trail, savoring the clean air, enjoying the feel of the sun on his face, thinking that it had a special kind of warmth here. The sun-washed buildings of Logan rose above the skyline, just where he knew they would, at first like a smudge on the flats ahead and then taking on the definite shape and many colors of the typical cow country town. His feeling of happiness rose.

And then he came to Logan, and rode past the line of false-fronts, clapboards, and awning posts, dismounted and hitched his horse, and walked into the *Roundup* saloon.

He walked straight up to the bar without looking at anyone else in the place; he asked for a drink, got it, and took it in one swallow. Then, leaning his body against the bar, he turned slowly and looked carefully round the room.

He didn't expect to see a dozen pairs of eyes on him, staring at him curiously, part apprehensively. That jolted him, knocked his memory back down the trail to what he'd been for five years after he'd walked out of the gates of Yuma until the day he'd saddled his horse to ride that long trail back. He stared at them, wondering if he'd see a face he recognized and half fearing that some one of them would recognize him. He didn't know that his face looked hard and arrogant. His mind registered another shock when his glance rested on a thin, sallow-faced man wearing a marshal's star on his dark, chequered shirt, and he saw the long barrel of a Colt pointing at him over the top of the marshal's table.

"You've had your drink, now get back to your horse and ride!" The marshal's eyes held a steady glint, and his voice was harsh and cold.

Chad Browning stood stock still, his mind numbed under the blows that the marshal's words had dealt him. He stared blankly at the lawman.

The thin-faced marshal was slight of build, but his voice rapped out with surprising power. "You heard what I said, stranger! I had to fight to get peace in this town, and by hokey I'm goin' to keep it that way! Get back to your horse and ride, bum!"

CHAD BROWNING glanced down at his dust-covered rig and began to understand the drift of the marshal's words. Chad was a six-footer, lean and hard-muscled. The flesh on his cheeks had fined down to a sun-blackened covering of skin over the bones of his face, emphasizing the high, sharp cheek-bones and the long, hard line of his jaw. His eyes glittered from narrowed slits of lids, made sharp and shrewd with a life of battling with the bright sun, with the need to be one jump ahead of the next fellow with his gun—because Browning had earned his living as a gunman since he'd walked through the gates of Yuma, five years back.

The town marshal of Logan, it seemed, had had his fill of wandering trigger-happy saddle tramps!

Chad eased himself away from the bar. He was aware that other guns were covering him, now that the marshal had the drop on him, but he didn't attempt to draw either of the two guns which swung back and forth with the motion of his thighs, snug in the smooth leather of his thonged-down holsters. Chad walked deliberately up to the marshal's table, and the atmosphere in the room seemed to charge up with electric current. He saw a slight waver in the marshal's gun. It was the sort of thing that his practised eye noticed—the sort of thing on which a gunman's life depends. He saw the tautening of the muscles in the marshal's chin, the tightening of his lips and knew that the marshal was a brave man who was afraid, but was trying to conquer his fear.

Chad's voice was quiet but it had a ring to it like the sound of a hammer on tempered steel. "I ain't aiming to stir up trouble here, marshal, but I don't take that kind of talk easily. I'm expectin' you to take it back!"

The marshal was white-faced as he said, "I told you to get out, smart boy!"

Browning watched the movement of every muscle on the marshal's face; he sensed rather than saw the pressure of the lawman's finger against the trigger of his Colt.

Chad tensed his muscles, felt his weight on the balls of his feet, and sidestepped. At the same time, he swept his right hand forward, gripped the edge of the marshal's table and tilted it, top first, back against the lawman's gun, pushing the marshal backward in his chair. His left hand flashed for a gun, all his movements synchronising into one.

The Colt in the marshal's hand went off and the bullet punched through the table top. Recklessly, Chad fired at the ceiling rafters, splintering the wood and bringing a shower of dust on to the awe-struck men who gazed at him from all parts of the room. Silently, everyone except the marshal holstered his gun. The marshal piled over the back of his chair, driven over by the weight of the table and the force behind Chad's thrust, and the gun in his hand clattered on the floor beside him.

Chad returned his gun to leather, pushed the table aside, at the same time kicking the lawman's Colt out of reach along the floor. He bent down and took a handful of the lawman's chequered shirt. Grimly he dragged the startled marshal to a sitting position, then hoisted him bodily from the boards.

"I could knock you out that door," Chad said softly. "I could salivate you, marshal, and leave you for these carrion to cart off to your Boothill."

"You talk big, hombre. You gunhands always act tough. Inside, you're soft and yeller!"

"You got your share of guts, marshal," Chad drawled, his face hard and implacable, "but you sure need a lesson in manners." He shut his lips tightly and shook the little marshal the way a terrier shakes a rat. "I aim to stay a long time in Logan. It'll take someone bigger than you to run me out!"

Chad lifted the marshal just clear of the ground, then let him drop. The lawman didn't fall, but he staggered against the upturned table before he regained his balance.

Chad Browning gave a contemptuous glance at the others in the saloon, then he turned and walked out.

He loosened the hitchrope of his horse and led the animal along the street toward the feed stable to be grained and cared for. While he walked, his eyes downcast, Chad's thoughts were racing. There was an ache in his stomach, and he had to fight the desire to fork his horse and ride out.

This wasn't the way he'd meant to return to his hometown.

CHAD BROWNING paid for the grain and left his horse, and he felt like an utter stranger in the town. He asked the hostler if he ever heard of John Paige.

"Sure have!" the man told him. "Lives over the top of the harness store."

Chad's eyes brightened. "Pop Lowery's saddlery?"

"Why sure, stranger. That's right. Old Pop ain't here no more. We took him away to Boothill some three years back. John Paige lives in Pop's old rooms, along with his daughter."

"His daughter?" Chad looked mystified, and then his face cleared. "Yeah, I remember now. Well, thanks feller."

He saw the stable man looking curiously at his tied-down holsters and, Chad felt embarrassed for the first time; at his skill with guns. *I'll have to change my gun leather,* he thought.

The street was unfriendly and cold now. It seemed as if hostile eyes were staring at him, hating him and all he stood for—despising him and longing for the chance to plant a bullet in his back, yet if given that chance lacking the courage to do so.

He paused outside the saddle shop to gaze through the door at the shining leather exhibits arrayed on the floor and hanging on hooks inside, his mind dwelling briefly on the past when he'd run in and out of the shop, taking a tug at Pop Lowery's beard on the way. He set his mind back again to the present and to what lay in front of him, and he went with bold steps towards the door at the side of the shop.

He passed through a dark hall, climbed the staircase of narrow, high-rising treads. On the landing he stopped outside the first door, hesitated for one moment, then knocked loudly. At the end of the landing a door opened, and Chad Browning saw for the first time on his return a face he remembered.

Chad felt excitement rising inside him. He walked with hurried steps along the landing toward the man who stood in the doorway, squinting in the uncertain light to try and catch a glimpse of the visitor.

"For Lord's sakes," Chad breathed. "It's good to see you again, John!"

John Paige didn't speak for a moment. He seemed to be focussing his mind on the stranger. When he found his voice, he said in gasp:

"It couldn't be! Chad Browning! Come in, son, and tell an old man what you've been doin' these last years!"

Paige held the door wider, and Chad saw that the hand which rested on the door was carrying a stick. The old man let his hand drop and took a part of his weight on the stick, leaning heavily forward on to it as Chad walked through the door.

"Son, it's good to see you well! I never thought to see you again after all these years."

"John," Chad said softly, "it's mighty good to meet an old friend. It's even good to meet a man you can call your friend!"

They gripped hands wordlessly and for a while their arms pumped up and down, and then John said again, "Come right in, Chad. Don't stand around in the door. Come right in and meet my daughter." He turned his head, called out, "Della!"

For a moment, there was no sound, and then one of the doors inside burst open and a girl came swiftly out.

She said, "Daddy, I'm in a hurry," but she halted beside him, putting an affectionate hand on his shoulder, standing erect and alive beside his old and shrunken form. She stared at Chad without recognition, giving him a brief smile, which he returned, saying, "Mighty pleased to see you again, Della," in a formal sort of way, but he flushed under her gaze.

OLD JOHN said, "This is Chad Browning, Della. An old friend of ours. He's been away for a long while."

As she looked at him, her expression changed a little. The surprise and wonderment left her brown eyes as she murmured, "I remember—"

Chad felt guilty and ashamed of his past under the accusation in her eyes, but he still stared at her, his eyes following the outline of her face, noting the fine evenness of her nose, the straight line of her mouth which was offset by the curves of her lips, and the smooth, clear surface of her skin which had been faintly tanned by the sun. She wore a wide straw hat, tied with pale blue ribbon, and a long, yellow cotton dress with a low, square neckline.

The old man gazed at her fondly, his eyes on a level with hers. "I reckon we better let you go, my dear. Mustn't keep Tod Lomarts hangin' around."

Della flushed slightly. "Daddy, he's

calling for me. I don't want to be late."

Chad stood aside to allow her to go, and his face was bloodless. Della said, "I'll be back in time to get your tea," and with rustling skirts she passed quickly by Chad Browning without looking at him again.

Chad followed her with his eyes until she turned into the passage, and he stood staring at the blank wall after she had gone until John Paige's voice broke in upon his line of confused thoughts.

"Shut the door, Chad, then come and tell me what you been doin' all these years." And the old man started his crippled walk along the short hallway which opened at the end without passing through another door into a small, square living room.

Chad turned slowly and walked behind him, his thoughts still far away. The old man pointed to a high, straight-backed chair with wooden arms, stuffed with hard horse-hair. Chad pulled it away from the wall, which was papered a dull brown, drew it close to the old man's rocker and sat down.

When he spoke, his inmost thoughts came out with a vehemence which surprised him the moment he'd voiced them.

"Tod," Chad said. "Della's too good for Tod Lomarts!"

- 2 -

DELLA glanced sideways at Tod Lomarts sitting beside her on the driving seat of the buggy, whipping the pair of chestnuts along at a merry pace. He had the air of driving along a leafed avenue in Boston or St. Louis, and he looked the part, dressed in a suit of fine grey cloth with a stiff-crowned grey hat which had a narrow, curly brim like an English bowler. His gay, golden-yellow cravet flower over his dazzling shirt front, and he was impeccably groomed, even to his pink and smooth fingernails. She studied the Greek curve of his nose in profile, noted the strength in his full lips and in heavy, wide jaw.

Tod Lomarts was a big figure in the business life of Logan. He was a dealer in stock and, since the Homestead Act, in real estate. He spent money freely and owned a comfortable house just outside the town, while he had an office in Logan and extensive stock pens near the railhead, which was a branch line, ending at Logan. Rumor had it that Lomarts was about to sponsor an immigration scheme which would bring families to settle in the district by the thousands, creating fresh markets for the local tradespeople. Tod Lomarts was a very popular man.

Della Paige loved these afternoon drives with Lomarts; they set the seal on her position in the town. On the one hand she worked hard to keep her father comfortable. He had enough money to live on, but he needed her attention. On the other, she was flattered by Lomarts' interest in her, and she had quickly accepted his first invitation to go for a drive with him one afternoon. These soon became a regular part of her life; she found she was enjoying Lomarts' company for its own sake, not merely because he was a respected figure in the town who'd shown interest in her.

This afternoon, a subtle barrier seemed to exist between them. Each of them seemed occupied with private thoughts, and it was only now, after their early exchanges of polite and formal conversation followed by a half-hour of silent driving, that Della Paige turned her head to look at Lom-

arts, a half smile on her face. "You look worried, Tod."

Lomarts squared his shoulders, and smiled back at her. "I've had business on my mind lately, Della. But no worries. Only thoughts of you and they only make me happy."

DELLA TUGGED at the gloves in her hands, smiling at her compliment.

"And what have you been thinking about, Della?"

She looked troubled. "I was thinking of a long time back," she said slowly. "Twelve years ago when I was only thirteen." She laughed. "Daddy used to give me lessons then from his books because there wasn't a school in Logan or anywhere near it at that time."

"That's a funny thing to think about," Lomarts laughed, but his eyes looked at her with curiosity.

"It was before you came here, Tod. I think you arrived shortly after it happened."

"What are you talking about?"

"Oh, it's all vague in my mind," she said. "I'm trying to remember all I can. It was the time a gang of train-robbers were at work, before the branch line was pushed through from Drummond."

"It certainly would be before that if it was before I came," Tod said. It was his way of boasting that he'd influenced the railroad company to build the branch line from Drummond to Logan.

Della smiled. "Yes, of course, Tod. Well, the Sheriff from Drummond—Coutts was his name, I think—had three of the gang cornered at the place they'd hidden their loot. There was shooting and the sheriff was killed. A man called Chad Browning was tried and sent to jail for the killing. I don't know why he only got five years. I got a terrible shock because he was a friend of daddy's."

Lomarts was smiling tolerantly. "What made you remember all this, my dear?"

"Chad Browning came to call on my father just as I came out to you this afternoon." A little worried frown creased her forehead.

Lomarts looked at her in stunned silence, the reins all but slipping from his fingers. He forced himself to smile at her. Then he said, "Oh, well, I suppose that's all right. After all, if he only had a five-year sentence, he must have come out of jail seven years ago, or something like that. Funny you should mention it, though. I heard from Soames, the marshal, before meeting you that some tough hand had ridden in and made a ruckus in the *Roundup*. I don't want any of these bad hombre types causing trouble in Logan when I bring the homesteaders out her from Kansas."

"No, you don't," Della agreed.

"Maybe you could hint to your father that Logan would be better off without men of this Chad Browning's stripe. Maybe he'll drift on. From what I heard from Soames, I don't fancy Browning will strike much of a welcome home anyway."

"I'll do what I can, Tod."

IT SEEMED to Chad Browning that there was a strange reserve about Della Paige while they were eating their dinner. It wasn't only to Chad that Della's behaviour seemed odd. Once or twice, John Paige paused while eating the meal, his knife and fork suspended over his plate, and he said, "Did you enjoy your drive this afternoon?" although he'd already asked her, as was his custom as soon as she had returned to their tiny apartment; or again, "Don't be shy, Della. Chad's an old friend of ours!"

At that, Della blushed, and started to say something which she hastily stopped, and just said lamely, "Heavens, I'm not shy," adding pointedly, "But you must remember that—Chad

Browning—isn't an old friend of mine."

She left the table straight after that and busied herself in the kitchen, while Chad reddened and sat very still at the table.

John Paige looked at him sharply and said, "Don't you take notice of Della, son. She's headstrong like a fine filly. She'll mellow when she knows you better."

Chad laughed shortly. "Logan don't seem over glad to see me back. Reckon I can't blame 'em. That marshal feller took me for a gunman. And as soon as folks find out who I am, and start remembering, they'll brand me a murderer and start figurin' I ought to have my neck stretched on the nearest tree. Shucks, I can take it. I don't have to stick around here all my life. I just got a feelin' I had to see the town again and see if any of the folks I used to know was still around. You know the way you get about places you lived in when you were a kid. They stick in your mind until you got to go back."

"Sure, son. I know how you'd be feelin'."

"I'm plumb happy to see you again, John. It gives a man a link with the past. Makes him feel there's still somethin' in life worth livin' for."

Della, on her way out from the kitchen, said, "I think a man—and a woman too—ought to do s o m e t h i n g with their life to...to make it worth living. If you don't, I don't think you've got a right to live!"

Chad pushed back his chair. "I reckon you better excuse me, John. I figure I don't fit in here."

"You'll stay just where you are!" old John cried out. "See here, Della, I can see you've been thinkin' about the time Chad was tried for murder. I don't believe he did it. What's more, if someone hadn't bribed the judge and jury I don't reckon he'd of ever been found guilty! As it was, they could only give him five years, because, they reckoned, there was some doubt." He snorted. "Some doubt! Yet they still send him to Yuma for the five best years of his life! I'd only like to find the skunk that did kill Sheriff Coutts and then passed the blame on to another man!"

CHAD PASSED a hand across his forehead. "I wish I could remember all that happened that night," he said quietly. "If I could have done that at the trial, I might have convinced the jury I was innocent."

"You couldn't have!" John Paige snorted. "They was all bought!"

"I don't know about that, John," Chad confessed. "The case I put up was mighty weak. I couldn't remember if I'd shot at the Sheriff or not. I reckoned at the time I was lucky to get away with only five years."

Della shrugged contemptuously. "You must have expected to go to jail for being one of the train robbers. You haven't changed your form since then, either. I heard you shot a man and broke up the *Roundup* as soon as you arrived in the town today."

She stood in front of him, hotly contemptuous of him. Chad turned on her, his eyes blazing, and then he burst into a great hoot of laughter.

"Is that what they told you?" he asked. "Well, isn't that typical of the whole gutless outfit that run this town now! If you really want to know, go down and ask your town marshal exactly what happened. He loves me about as much as he would a diamondback he found asleep in his bed, but I figure he'd give you the truth about what happened in the saloon. Ask him who drew a gun first. Ask him if anyone got hurt, let alone shot up. Go on!"

"Easy, Chad," old John murmured. "Don't get yourself heated up, boy."

"I'm sorry, John," Chad muttered

bitterly. "I better go, like I said just now. I didn't come here to go raisin' trouble." His voice rose. "I came back to bury the past, forget about it! If I did wrong—and I don't think I ever killed a man—I paid for it. And I paid for it without cryin' out about it. I want to forget it because it's dead, gone. Ain't that good enough for other folks, too?"

"It ought to be, son. It sure ought to be," old John said, wagging his grey hair. "But somehow, folks don't see it that way. Once a killer, always a killer, they say. The jury's verdict was good enough for them. They won't give you no peace where they know you've been found guilty of murder, Chad!"

A wave of anger surged over Browning. "*You* don't believe I did it, John!" It was almost like a cry for help. "Maybe I didn't. If I didn't, someone else must have gutshot Sheriff Coutts. You think I'm a killer, Della?"

Della was standing stiffly. She lifted her eyes to his, and Chad read her answer in their cold depths. She made a gesture of contempt. He saw she was looking now at his tied-down holsters, his twin guns.

Tight-lipped, she said, "Once a killer, always a killer!"

LOOKING at her, Chad wanted to prove that he wasn't a killer, that although he'd lived by his guns for five years he'd never killed a man except in self-defence. He wanted to prove it to her, if to no one else, because she had suddenly become the most important person in the whole of his world.

Quietly he said to John Paige, "I'll never be able to thank you enough for your welcome, John. You've given me back something, made me feel like an ordinary man again." He turned a strange look on Della. "You've given me something, too, Della. You've made me want to find out who did kill Sheriff Coutts from Drummond, twelve years ago. It's a cold trail I'll be follow'in' now. But I'll find out who killed him, or I'll quit Logan for ever!"

The intensity of feeling in his voice, and something of the sincerity in him, were communicated to Della, who stood silent, not knowing what to say.

Old John Paige struggled out of his chair, grabbed his stick and hobbled toward the door as Chad started to walk away. Della stood watching them go, her thoughts confused, having to admit—even though she hated to—that Chad's words had made an effect on her.

Chad stopped at the door and looked grimly at John Paige. "I don't know where I'm goin' to start, John. All the slime that went on twelve years back is goin' to be mighty well buried and beaten down now. Except that I know this: there were others with me when Coutts got that bullet in his belly. One of them was Bart Browning, but I guess he's dead and buried long ago."

"Chad," old John said in a voice that was scarcely raised above a whisper. "Bart Browning still lives. He lives like a hermit up in the mountains, holed up in a cave in the rocks. No one else in Logan knows he's alive up there, only me. When you're ready to see him, saddle up a horse for me, and I'll lead you up the trail."

Excitement blazed inside Chad. "Uncle Bart still alive! He'll know, John! He'll know! Uncle Bart was a straight-shooter. He won't sell me down the river."

There was a faint, sorrowful smile on John's face. "I hope you're right about that, son. I sure hope you're right!"

- 3 -

BLAZING LIGHTS flared like beacons along the dark street as he made his way to an eating house. He ate an uninterrupted meal, and then headed for the *Roundup*. The saloon was crowded now, packed elbow-tight with cowpunchers, drifters and suited businessmen. He still wore his thonged-down holsters and his pair of guns. They were an insurance against danger. He knew that the hand of every man in the town would be against him. Now he wasn't going to compromise with them. It would be a fight against prejudice, and a fight against the treachery of that unknown man who'd gutshot Sheriff Coutts twelve long years ago and succeeded in having the blame shifted on to Chad Browning. Chad figured that as long as that fight was on, he'd need his guns, and he wore them with a fierce pride now.

He drew an occasional, casual glance as he drove his way to the bar, took his drink and shoved away again in search of a table. All the tables were occupied, but he came to one with only two men sitting at it, where two of the chairs were vacant.

"You gents mind if I squat here?" Chad asked easily.

"Go ahead," one man said, and Chad set his bottle and glass on the table top.

"Have a drink," Chad said. The other two grunted and accepted.

"Here's to your dirty past," one man said, raising his glass.

"I'll be in that," the other chuckled.

Chad raised his own glass and drank, his eyes studying them over the top. They were a pair of cowpunchers in from the range, or in Logan from a trail drive. They wore the customary denims and big, brown Stetsons with the bands studded with silver emblems tilted back on their heads, the rawhide thongs from the hats hanging down beneath their chins which carried a day's growth of beard. They were of similar height and build, one having a broad face which was inclined to be squat, the other thinner-faced and sharper-nosed.

Chad set his glass down. His eyes switched from one to the other.

"You fellers know Tod Lomarts?" he asked tentatively.

They exchanged glances and the broadfaced one said, "Yeah, we know Lomarts. He don't exactly mix in our circle though."

Lean-face grinned. "Some folks reckon he's been a power of good for the district. Others ain't made their minds up."

CHAD ASKED, "What do you hombres figure?"

Lean-face went on, "Well, it's this-a-way. We work for the Circle-'n'-Box away out on the flats. It don't altogether suit us, this cuttin' the range into little passels and sellin' it out to homesteaders."

"Turns the range into a city backyard," Broad-face growled. "Next thing, we'll have to pay for water."

"Lomarts stands to make a packet out of it, sellin' the land at ten bucks an acre, though from what you can see he don't need the dinero."

Chad said, "He owns all the land, huh?"

"The railroad company didn't build the branch line until after they was some law passed about land titles. They took up miles and miles of territory along the line and around Logan. Then offered it for sale to get settlers out from the East to use their railroad line. Lomarts bought the lot, dirt cheap, I guess, though we don't know the figure."

Lean-face put in, "Everythin's set

for a train load of settlers to arrive this week."

Chad nodded. He had heard similar news from John Paige that afternoon. He was interested to know other people's opinions of Tod Lomarts. He thanked the men, and said, "My name's Chad Browning. I aim to stay around a-whiles. Maybe you got room for an extra hand on your outfit?"

Lean-face said, "I'm Sam Kinsey. This is Hank Matthews. Sorry, can't promise a job. Our boss is hittin' a spell of trouble just now. Like Hank said, looks like we'll have to pay for water if Lomarts goes ahead with his scheme."

Chad looked up to see another man standing at his side, glass in hand, pointing to the vacant chair. Chad nodded and the three men were silent.

The fourth man sat down and observed, "Mighty crowd t o n i g h t. What'll it be like when the sodbusters roll in, eh?"

Chad Browning turned his attention to the newcomer, and as he did so, it seemed that all hell broke loose!

The stranger suddenly drew up his knee under the table, lifting its two legs clear of the ground. After that, his movements went with oiled precision. His left hand helped the table on its way, pivoting over on the two legs which stayed on the floor, and at the same time he rose to his feet, snatched the gun from Chad's left holster and shot from low down over the top of the moving table. The shot hit Hank Matthews between the eyes, killed him at once, and punched him out of his chair. The stranger's actions had been hidden to all but Chad Browning. Just as suddenly, he dropped the gun.

Chad made a gliding movement with his right hand, drew his other gun, pointing it at the stranger, "Elevate them slick hands, mister, or you die just the same way!"

Sam Kinsey pushed the table clear of the group, regarding his dead pardner with shocked disbelief. He gasped, "Chad! What d'you do that for, you dirty, underhanded—"

"This is the guy that did it," Chad snapped, indicating the stranger. "He reached for my gun same time as he tipped up the table."

"Yeah?" Sam snarled. "You want to tell the judge a better story than that!"

It was like a blow to the stomach as Chad Browning realised what he'd bought into.

The stranger called out to the crowd, who'd gathered round, stilled their voices and stood in a menacing circle. Desperation edged his voice.

"Get the gun off him, he's a killer!"

Chad said levelly, "Take a look at this! There's my other gun on the board's. This feller here tipped up the table, jumped up and took my gun, shot Hank Matthews here, then dropped my gun! I ain't touched it, and that's the gun that killed Matthews."

There was an angry growl, and then voices hurled abuse at him. A shot clipped past his head, and he knew that there was no time to stop and argue. Someone yelled out, "Get the marshal!" but other voices, more insistent, howled, "Plug him!" and "Lynch him!"

Chad knew the feelings of the mob and he knew that all the evidence, all the weight of public sentiment was against him, even if he kept a whole skin until Marshal Soames arrived.

HE BENT down for his other gun, and then, shooting from one knee, he put a bullet through each of the hanging lamps in the saloon. A welter of slugs breezed past him, crashing into the wall a few feet behind him. He remained crouching and lunged toward the window in the wall. For a brief moment he tensed himself and then heaved his body up to the sill, threw himself against the glass, crashed through in a roll and hit the

plankwalk outside. For a few seconds he was shaken, then he picked himself up, felt for his guns and started to run for the livery stable.

Shouts followed him, and soon the chase was on, men pouring out of the saloon with guns in their fists, sending ropes of fire lancing forward in the darkness. Chad Browning didn't stop to look back. He ran on urgently with the high archway which led into the stable's yard and the barn beyond. The big gates were shut, but he found a smaller one at the side, which opened at the lifting of the latch. He quickly let himself in and shut the gate, his fingers searching for and finding a bolt on the inside. Swiftly he slammed the bolt across, then drew his gun.

The stable-man came out with a startled look on his face. He'd heard the shots and didn't expect a customer at this hour. He was wiping gravy from his thick lips with a spotted handkerchief, his eyebrows lifted almost to his hair-line.

Chad levelled his sixgun, and the hostler lifted his hands, one of them still holding the handkerchief.

"Wh—what you want?" the stable man mumbled. He remembered this stranger, remembered noticing the gunman's stamp marked on him.

"My horse," Chad said laconically. "An' I want him quick."

The hostler moved promptly. Chad followed him, the Colt's barrel at a discreet distance from the man's back. They reached the stable, which was in darkness, and Chad murmured in the other's ear, "I can see in the dark," which was an indirect threat not to fool around in the lightless interior of the barn.

The hostler found a lamp quickly, and lit it. Chad's horse had been grained and groomed and was resting now, but started to its feet quickly enough as the hostler swung saddle and harness over his arms, and Chad approached it.

There was a hammering on the door at the front of the yard.

A voice bawled, "He coulda come in here!"

"Hi, Seth! You there?" Chad heard more growling and a couple of shots were loosed off in the street.

The stable man looked at Chad for instructions. Chad said, "Wait till I'm saddled up."

FIVE MINUTES passed, and it sounded as if the main part of the pursuit had ranged on along the street, though some men still loafed outside the livery gates.

"Go out, now," Chad said. "Tell them you ain't seen no one. Tell them you been sweeping up in the barn."

A voice roared from the front, "Hey, this gate ain't usually bolted! Any one seen Seth in town tonight?"

Another called out again, "You there, Seth?" And Chad heard the pursuers stamping back toward the stable, having apparently drawn blank further along the street.

"Go on out now! Don't forget I can hit your back from here!"

The hostler moved slowly forward, Chad let him take a half-dozen paces, then he made a leap for his saddle. With a tight wrist-hold on the reins, he steadied the horse at the doors of the barn. The hostler went on toward the gate. Chad waited to hear him say, "Hold on to your shirt-tails," in a grumbling voice.

He heard a man at the gate say, "Seth! You seen..."

Then Chad dug his heels to the horse's flanks, felt the powerful muscles of the animal bunch and spring, and then he guided the horse into the yard and turned toward the seven-foot paling wall which surrounded it.

He knew that Seth would spill the beans, knew that he couldn't do anything to prevent it once the hostler reached the front gate. He turned

the horse, felt the animal hesitate as the fence loomed in front of them. Chad kicked it forward. The horse realised what it had to do, and its powerful legs drove forward and then leapt.

Suddenly shouts and the sound of shooting broke loose from the street. Chad's horse cleared the fence stumbled once as it landed and Chad fell forward on to the horse's neck, his knees tightening convulsively as the horse staggered, almost fell, recovered balance, and started a hell-for-leather gallop that was made up of pure fright and the goading of Chad's boot heels grinding against its flanks. Shouts and a spattering of lead followed him, but the slugs were well wide. The mob in the street had only just realised that their prey was escaping on horseback; they were all afoot. Some three or four of them jumped for riderless horses tethered in the street and took up the chase.

Chad had cut from the side alley, which took in a few vacant allotments that he crossed on the diagonal, and by the time he'd reached the main drag he had a flying lead of a hundred yards. Before the pursuit had even mounted, Chad was out into the empty darkness of the flats.

He turned toward the mountain trail, and it was an hour before he let the horse ease its pace, break down to a lope for a breathing spell. He turned in his saddle, his eyes and ears searching for a sign of the pursuers, but he heard nothing, and saw only the dotted lights of Logan focused together against the dark background of the flats below. It was so dark he could hardly see the trail below him. The stars were covered by a film of night cloud. Ahead, and all around him, the darkness was impenetrable.

Walking the horse now, for safety's sake, his eyes screwed up, he peered at the trail, seeing the country at the edge of it break up into loose rocks and bigger boulders. Eventually, he pulled the horse off-trail, skirted one of the house-sized boulders, and halted.

Chad dismounted, unsaddled and ground-haltered the animal, unrolled his tarp and spread it on the hard ground. The night was warm, and he lay down, though sleep was far from him yet.

- 4 -

TOD LOMARTS reread the twin sheets of rice paper that were covered with close lines of typescript and then set them down on the polished top of his desk in favor of an earnest study of his fingernails. He stood up with a burst of energy, sending his swivel chair rocking on its two back legs before it came back to rest against the backs of his knees. He bunched his right fist and smacked it into the palm of his left.

Then he ran his hand through his fair, wavy hair, sat down again, and stared moodily at the wall facing his desk. He was chewing at the skin beside his fingernails when the door from the main street opened and a man walked into Lomarts' office, shut the door behind him and bolted it.

Lomarts looked at him without interest and said, "Take a seat, Phil."

Phil Davidson pulled a chair from the wall and sat down at the side of the immense desk of carved and highly polished wood. Davidson was dressed like a cowpuncher on a visit to the town, in denims and a plain blue shirt. A dark ten-gallon hat rode carelessly on the back of his head.

He crossed his legs and rested his left hand on the side of his high-heeled calf leather riding boot. His complexion was dark, and his eyes looked out quizzically from either side of a narrow, sharp nose. His mouth was small.

Chad Browning would have recognised him as the murderer of Hank Matthews in the *Roundup,* the night before.

"You make me laugh, Tod," Davidson said after a pause, during which he studied the drawn, nervous expression on Lomarts' face. "Everything's going your way now, and you still manage to find something to worry about."

"Land values have taken a slump!" Lomarts said harshly. "We'll be lucky if we get a dollar an acre for the rest. And if the sodbusters arrivin' this week get wind of the crash, they'll hold off and won't pay the balance on their allotments."

"You can't go wrong, Tod," Davidson said softly. "The Western States are bound to go on developing. And that means land is worth more and more."

"Hell, I don't want to do this for ever!" Lomarts burst out. "I've had enough of it. I want to get married and have a quiet life where I can do as I please." He added, more softly, "Heard anything more of Chad Browning?"

Davidson grinned. "Not a word. I don't think he'll be showin' his nose in Logan again. Would you?"

"I still think you should have killed him," Lomarts said gloomily. "What if he gets wind of Bart Browning?"

"I fancy he's burnt up so much wind since he lit out of town last night, he ain't had time to get any wind of Bart."

Lomarts shifted the subject again, coming back to the thing that worried him most. "The settlers are due here on Friday, ain't they?"

"The day after tomorrow," Davidson grunted.

"I've got an idea, Phil."

"Yeah?"

"We tell them when they arrive that we'll accept their money only after the land agent comes over with the registered deeds of each parcel. Make it sound like we want to put on a bit of ceremony. Meantime we urge them to put their money in the bank. I figure most of 'em will do that. That will be the time for Bart Browning to make his last ride!"

"Bust open the bank? Them settlers are goin' to be mighty touchy."

LOMARTS smiled. "That's where we come in. We show how generous we are. We give a helping hand to these people in their misfortune because they are such important people, noble pioneers...you know the sort of twaddle...and we let them have their land at a reduced rate, say, five bucks an acre or less if we get enough out of the bank. We'll give them time to pay."

Phil Davidson grinned sardonically. "You should of been in politics, Tod."

"That's where I aim to be, one day," Lomarts said calmly. He looked down at the thin sheets of notepaper with the typewritten message from his business associates in New York, telling him of the sudden drop in land values as quoted in the city. He screwed it up with a savage gesture and dropped it into his wastepaper basket. "So much for that!" he said explosively.

"You want me to ride up and see Bart Browning," Phil suggested. "How many more men will you want?"

"Yeah," Lomarts chuckled. "See old Bart and get him about four riders. You know where to get them. It'll be like old times for the old hellion, like his train-busting days. You

can ride with him yourself if you want a bit of excitement!"

"I could do with some practice with a shooter," Davidson said. "I had ants in my stomach when I whipped Chad Browning's gun from its holster last night. I had to move quick, I can tell you, and I ain't had much chance to keep my eye in while I been chasin' half over the United States for you."

Lomarts grinned. "Keeps you out of trouble, Phil."

"Or gets me into it. You never know what's goin' to happen next on some of your jobs!"

"All right, Phil. Go out the back way, will you? And don't come and see me here at all, nor anywhere else in daylight, until this thing is all over."

"Sure, Tod," Davidson said, getting up from his chair. "You can leave Bart Browning and the rest to me."

"Come and see me after the settlers arrive though, Phil," Lomarts warned. "We'll go into the details then."

Davidson nodded and left by a side door from the office, which led him through another room which was furnished like a sitting room, into a passage and thence through a door at the back into the backyard of the building. Soon after that, Phil Davidson was mingled with the morning crowd in Logan.

HANK MATTHEWS had been the first victim of a killing in Logan for over twelve months, and Marshal Soames let everyone know it by the way he went about tracking down Chad Browning.

He questioned the stable man and learned that Chad had made inquiries about John Paige. He straight-away called on old John.

Della opened the door. She'd been washing the breakfast dishes, and she still had a frilly apron tied at her waist. The Marshal said, "Good day, Miss Paige. Your father at home?"

John Paige's excursions out of his room were few and far between these days, the stairs forming the main barrier to his going out, except when Della was able to help him, and she said, "Yes, Marshal. Come inside."

Soames had the same respect for old John Paige as most of Logan had, so he said, almost apologetically, "You heard of the killin' in the *Roundup* last night, John?"

John Paige, his stick leaning against one knee, his hands resting flat along the arms of his rocker chair, lifted his eyes slowly to meet the Marshal's level gaze. Della stood to one side, and slightly to the back of the Marshal. She had a hostile air about her and she stood poised, looking almost predatory. Old John said, "I heard, Fred."

Fred Soames said implacably now, "Seth of the livery just told me the killer asked for you when he stabled his horse yesterday. Did he come and see you, John?"

Looking at Della, John Paige knew that he couldn't shield Chad by lying. "He came here, Fred."

"You know him then? A friend of yours?"

"Sure I know him." John Paige stretched his arthritis-ridden legs with an effort. He knew that if he didn't give the facts straight out to the Marshal, Della wouldn't hesitate, and it wouldn't do Chad any good if he appeared to be hedging, trying to conceal something. John went on more quickly, with feeling: "Listen, Fred. I know you had a brush with Chad when he first got in to Logan, in the *Roundup*. Maybe he looked a tough character, a hardcase, but I know better. Chad Browning is his name, Fred. Does that mean anythin' to you?"

The Marshal gave a slow shake of his head.

John Paige went on with his narrative. "You'll find it in your records,

Fred. Twelve years ago, a jury sent him to jail for a killin' he never did. I know he never did it. I knowed that kid since his mother was nursin' him in a long wrap, watched him grow up and tried to help him when he was orphaned. Somebody else beat me to it, and he got into a train-bustin' gang. One of the gang shot Sheriff Coutts from Drummond and shifted the blame on to Chad and Chad went to jail. The case wasn't strong enough to have the kid hung. When he came out of Yuma he lived by his wits, and then by hirin' out his guns. He's no killer, though, Fred. By all accounts, he could have killed you yesterday afternoon, but he just shook you up instead. Am I right?"

FRED SOAMES colored, but he had to nod.

"All right," John went on, his voice thickening with anger now. "Someone in the town didn't like the idea of Chad Browning turning up after all these years. Someone who was scared Chad might want to find out who'd really killed Sheriff Coutts."

"No one in Logan knew him, except you," Soames said sceptically.

"You're wrong there," old John said triumphantly. "There was a man so frightened of Chad he had to drive him away from Logan. Chad never met him while he was back, but someone told him that Chad was back, so he kept out of the way while one of his men framed Chad Browning with murder!"

"Who was it, John?"

"This man knew him well. They used to ride in the same train-bustin' gang together."

"Tell me who it is, John, and I'll drag him in and talk to him."

John Paige was looking straight into his daughter's eyes. He paused and then said, "Tod Lomarts is the man." He dropped his gaze from Della as he saw the hurt come into her eyes. He pitied her and at the same time hated himself for hurting her. Yet he knew that he'd had to tell her sooner or later.

A gasp came from Della. "Oh, no!"

Simultaneously, Marshal Fred Soames said gruffly, "You're talking wild now, John. I thought you had something serious to tell me. You're not really trying to tell me that Tod Lomarts was once a train-buster! Why, he wasn't even in the district as long ago as that!"

"That's the impression he likes to give," old John said dryly. "I fancy he makes sure everyone else gets it."

"All right, John," the Marshal said, his voice as dry as the old man's. "Is there anything your daughter might like to add?"

"Only that I think my father's got hold of the wrong information about Tod Lomarts," she said in a low voice.

John Paige said nothing, and the Marshal prepared to go.

Della came back from the door and faced her father, anger blazing in her eyes. "If you think more of this killer—" she spat out the word—"than Tod Lomarts whom I'm going to marry some day soon, that's your affair, father. But I do think you might have shown some more consideration for me than you did in front of Marshal Soames!"

"My dear, I didn't want to do it," he said softly. "I won't insult you by saying that it was for your own good. But it was the truth, whether you liked it or not. It is for you to make up your own mind about it."

"You said last night that people say, 'Once a killer, always a killer' and it looks like the people are right."

"Maybe they are, Della, but Chad Browning's no killer. And the fact remains that Tod Lomarts was a train-buster, twelve years ago."

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CHAD BROWNING spent the day after his escape from Logan in searching the upper slopes of the foothills which rose up from the flats of the cattle-raising country towards the high folds of the Bearpaws, a chain of the Rocky Mountains. As he rode, memory returned of the trails and mesas he'd known as a boy. Often he came across cattle grazing on patches of summer pasture, and he kept a wary eye on these for fear of striking a cowpuncher at work, although it was yet too early for round-up and branding. By the end of the day, Chad felt he knew the country again, knew every twisted trail, dried-up watercourse and shale-strewn arroyo.

As the sun dropped over the distant tops of the mountain ranges, Chad turned his horse back in the direction of Logan and started to return at an easy pace which would bring him to the edge of the town soon after nightfall.

A quarter-mile outside the town Chad dismounted and ground-tied the horse. The lights ahead were bright and promised trouble, but Chad could now remember every step of the way. Softly he scuffed through the darkness of the trail, leaving it a hundred yards before it became Logan's main street, skirting the side of the end building, then keeping to the darkened end of the backyards and allotments until he came to Pop Lowery's saddlery. There was a light burning on the first floor at the back.

Cautiously Chad moved alongside the old weatherboard shop, halted when he came to the edge of the main street. He waited, scarcely breathing while a man walked past, and then, on the tips of his toes, ran on to the boardwalk and into the hallway leading to John Paige's room. He stopped outside the entrance door and knocked softly, stepping back into the shadows until the door was opened. Standing in the doorway Della was silhouetted. Chad's heart thudded, but he screwed up his courage and stepped quickly forward. He put his hand over her mouth as she started to scream.

As she fought to free herself, he held her tighter, and he hated the thought that he was hurting her. With his other hand he gripped her shoulder and forced her into the short inside passage. He kicked the door shut behind him with his foot. He heard John Paige's voice say, "Who's there, Della?"

He pushed the girl in front of him, releasing her mouth, and she called him a beast and a murderer. Chad called back softly, "It's me, Chad."

They came into the lighted room, Della straightening her clothes, and feeling her bruised mouth. Chad said, "I hope you'll pardon me, Miss Della," in a voice as humble as his feeling.

"I don't expect any better from you!" she snapped back at him tightly.

Chad looked away from her, shrugging his shoulders, his face tightening grimly. "I want to ride up to Bart Browning's hideout tonight, John. Can you make it?"

OLD JOHN, in his usual rocking chair, looked curiously into Chad's face. There was a faint harshness in his voice as he said, "Plenty of men would gunwhip you for handling their daughters that-a-way. Most men would figure you a killer, anyway." He watched the reaction on Chad's face.

Chad stared at the old man for a

moment, searching for something in the weary old eyes. Unsure of himself for a moment, Chad said slowly, "I only did what I thought was necessary, John. I wouldn't harm a hair of Della's head." He turned to look at her, saw her contemptuous smile, dropped his eyes under the scorn of her gaze, then lifted them again and stared straight at her as he said, "I've gone and fallen crazily in love with you, Della. That's why I aim to prove that I'm no killer, and that Tod Lomarts is a no-good..."

Della gave a hard laugh, while John Paige stared with interest at the young man.

Chad said firmly, "And I figure that Bart Browning might be able to help me sort things out. If he'll talk about that time Sheriff Coutts got shot, he'll maybe clear my name..."

Old John said in a hard voice, "He's a twisty old cuss, and I ain't been up to see him for nigh on eight months, since thus a-thrittus got me in the legs."

Chad said levelly, "If you feel you can make the ride, I'll get you a horse right pronto, John. If not, tell me how to get there, and I'll ride alone."

Della said furiously, "You're not going with him daddy! It's madness! This man is wanted for murder, and if the Marshal found out you'd be in bad trouble. Besides, you're in no shape to make that ride at all, let alone after dark—"

"It's the least I can do to help a man when he's up against it." John Paige said softly. "I don't believe Chad ever done murder. What sort of a packrat would I be if I didn't do this little to help him? I believe in him and you don't. That's the difference, Della. I guess men think different to women, my dear. Don't take it hard."

Della chewed her lip. "I could call Fred Soames and tell him what you're going to do."

Chad squared his jaw. "If you do, they still won't take me," he said with quiet determination. "I just told you I aim to prove to you that I'm no killer. If you hadn't been so pretty, I'd maybe have hightailed out last night. You've only got yourself to blame," he added with a flatlipped, sardonic grin.

Della opened and closed her fists and a feeling of desperation came over her. Bitter tears were close to her eyes as she said, "Oh, very well. Do as you like, both of you!" She looked accusingly at her father. "I think you're mad!" She turned a stare full of hate on Chad. "And I hate you! I wish you'd never come to Logan!"

She turned and almost ran to her bedroom. They heard a dry sob from her before the door slammed shut and the walls of all the rooms shook with the impact of it.

Chad looked helplessly at John, and shrugged. "I'm sorry about Della," he said in a low voice. "Seems I've kind of caused a lot too much trouble since I came home."

John Paige thought for a moment before he spoke. "Don't be too harsh on yourself, son. I never liked that Lomarts hombre very much myself. All this trouble is because of him, not just because you came home. And I can tell you I'd a damn' sight rather have it happen now before the swine's had a chance to hurt her!"

Chad stood silent, thinking this over, finding himself agreeing with John's opinions, partly because he wanted to, and then he said slowly, "If you fancy you can make the ride, John..."

"Sure I can make it!" old John said fiercely. "I ain't a danged cripple yet! Go get me a horse saddled up and I'll be ready to ride!"

Chad smiled warmly at him, impulsively stepped forward and gripped the old man's arm. "You've been as good as a father to me, John, all the way. Maybe if I'd stuck to you in-

stead of to Uncle Bart, things would've been different now..."

"Maybe they would, son. But you can't change what's gone before." And he tamped down the tobacco in his pipe, struck a match, his eyes on the glowing strands of tobacco rising with the heat of the match over his pipebowl. He blew out smoke and then looked up at Chad again; there was a bright twinkle in his eyes as he said, "Run along, son. I'll be waiting for you."

"I'll be back," Chad said, and went quickly to the front door.

HE HALTED on the doorstep at street level and peered out into the darkness surrounding the building. Beyond the lights were burning, and he had to choose a way to the livery stable that would avoid the lights, for fear someone would recognise him as he passed through the lighted area. Moving cautiously, he went past the front of the harness store, seeking a dark patch of road where he could cross. Then he doubled back, and walked normally along the street, just off the boardwalk, at the edge of the roadway.

He smiled grimly as he approached the small side gate at the entrance to the livery. He lifted the latch and walked into the yard, drawing his gun as he did so. There was a light on in the building on the side which fronted the street, and Chad pushed a door open lightly and entered. The first room was in darkness, but the inside door was open, and Chad could see the light through it. He found his way across the floor easily enough, but halted when he reached the connecting door. Voices came to his ears.

"...Listen, Mister Davidson, I ain't in the habit o' turnin' horses out now... If you wanted yours why didn't you give me the word durin' the day..." It was Seth's voice, and Chad started to retreat, not wanting to clash with another of the stable man's customers. Then he heard the other man's voice, and he stopped dead in his tracks for a moment before seeking cover again in the darkened room.

"...Hell, if that's the way you feel about it, Seth, here's a buck for your trouble. Hang on to your shirttail, pal."

That was Davidson's voice. Chad recognised it as surely as he'd have known his own. It was the man who'd murdered Hank Matthews the night before.

Chad backed away from the connecting door as Seth came out. There was a rought table in the center of the room and Chad crouched down on hands and knees as the hostler walked into the room, carrying a lantern. The light blazed all over the room, but neither Seth nor Davidson expected to see anyone there, and they didn't shift their eyes around the room. Chad stopped breathing until they'd stepped out into the yard. He caught a glimpse of Davidson as the man walked through, and he knew he'd not made a mistake.

Chad Browning came to a quick decision. He must either allow Davidson to get clear away, as the man apparently intended to, or he had to forget about making the ride to Bart Browning's hideout tonight. The latter course meant leaving old John waiting for him, perhaps thinking that he'd been picked up by the Marshal or some other over-zealous citizen, but Chad knew that he had to clear himself of the murder charge of the night before even more urgently than he had to unravel the mystery surrounding Sheriff Coutts' killing, which was already dead and forgotten. He decided to follow Davidson and find out what he could of the man's connections. Even if he had to follow the man to the next town, Chad thought, he'd catch up with Davidson and get the truth from him. He savored the

thought of catching up with Phil Davidson in a strange town...

Chad let himself out of the stabling yard and moved off along the street. He saw a powerful-looking black fastened to the hitching rail a half-block away. Swiftly he made for it, calmed the horse as it started to move, unhitched the rope and waited for Davidson to emerge from the stable gates.

Chad held himself quite still, in the shadow of the horse, all his senses alert for a sign of the horse's owner. No one appeared, and all seemed quiet at that moment.

One of the big gates swung open, and a few seconds later, a horse and rider came cantering out. It was the signal for Chad. He sprang for the saddle of the black he had unhitched, jammed his feet in the stirrups and swung the horse's head round to follow Davidson.

THE SKY was cloudless tonight and gave more light to the earth. Even so, Chad knew it would be a tricky task to keep close enough behind Davidson without betraying the fact that he was following the man. He let him ride a quarter-mile ahead along the trail before he attempted to close the distance.

Five miles along the westward trail out of Logan, by the time Chad was thinking that Phil Davidson as indeed making a getaway to new territory, the rider in front made a sharp turn to the north, breaking his pace down to accommodate the rough and broken trail which led up into the foothills before it disappeared in a wasteland of scrub and boulder.

Chad checked his pace and swung up behind, and followed Davidson up the first, gentle incline, halting from time to time to listen for the sound of the hoofbeats ahead of him. They were more distinct now, as they clattered on solid rock.

By this method, Chad followed Davidson deep into the hills. The pace of the man ahead slowed all the time, although the going was easy enough, and Chad realised with a thrill of satisfaction and superiority that Davidson was uncertain of his path. Chad wondered whether he was heading, for the trail lead nowhere. It was more difficult now to trail Davidson in one way, because there was no sure way that he would take—it being now a question of checking every few minutes by the sound of the horse ahead which direction Davidson was taking. On the other hand, Chad had an immense advantage because he knew every track and draw and canyon in this country, so that if he found himself off the track of Davidson's horse, he could quickly get his bearings again, cut across country and resume the pursuit.

Chad was less cautious now, but still it seemed that Davidson was unaware of his tracker, probably because the shadow of a premonition of danger never even crossed the man's mind. They'd crossed the last of the narrow, grassy mesas where the cattle grazed on their summer pasture when Chad realised that he'd lost Phil Davidson.

He had halted twice and listened for the sound of hoofbeats, and heard nothing, and still pressed on along the route that Davidson had seemed to be following. He wheeled the horse back down the gully he'd started along, and returned to the last mesa of thin, burnt-up grass where he'd last caught a silvery shadowy glimpse of the rider in front of him. Mystified, Chad stopped to listen and again heard nothing.

He urged his horse back along the verge of the grass, beneath an overhanging outcrop of smooth rock, searching it for a cleft through which Davidson could have ridden. And, by looking closely, that was the way he discovered the brush-covered mouth of

a narrow gully that cut off from the mesa. Chad dismounted and led his horse forward, pushing the tangled growth aside and stumbling over loose and broken rocks as he went, the horse dragging on the reins behind him.

Through the mouth, the brush became thinner where there was only rock for it to grow on, and Chad began to make out the outline of the gully. He returned to the edge of the mesa, mounted and rode on along the line of the outcrop, peering closely at the rock for signs of more breaks.

HE CAME to a lone scrub-pine and halted. This was where he'd waited when he'd caught the glimpse of Davidson ahead of him. Satisfied now that the rider ahead had taken the route through the concealed gully, Chad returned to its mouth, drove the horse straight through the tangled entrance into the rising, clearer but rougher ground inside.

He was searching his brain for a memory of this gully, but it escaped him. All he could remember was that the only way upward from this part of the mesa was by way of the gully he had started along until he'd realised that Davidson was no longer in front of him. He tried to picture the slope of the hills in daylight. Then he remembered.

He went on more slowly, watching every inch of the ground and the walls of the gully, as alert as a cat at night. He expected to come upon Davidson at any minute now. For this gully led directly into a sheer-sided box canyon. There was no other way out than the route he was following now.

There was a steep rise for twenty or thirty yards, and the walls of the gully were rising higher all the time. Chad let the horse pick its own way forward. He noticed once that the horse's hoof splashed in water as it came down, and his breathing quickened.

Suddenly he reined in and pulled off to the side of the gully floor. Ahead, he could hear the clattering of horses's hooves on the rock floor. He drew his gun and slewed his horse across the trail, at right-angles to the line of the gully. He kept perfectly still.

Then he discerned the shadowy figure of a horse and rider coming down at a fast trot. Chad knew he had to stop the rider, and he had to get his blow in first. He couldn't avoid being detected at such close range, and he knew that all the advantage of surprise was on his side.

He pushed the horse into a sudden leap forward and it swung round to face the oncoming rider head on. Chad called out, "Haul up!" and loosed off a slug. The man's horse shied and then came on at a faster pace, the rider bent low over the animal's neck.

Chad flattened his lips and pressed them together as he pushed forward to cut off the other rider. With a mighty lurch, Chad's horse struck the oncoming one, and the black was shaken almost off its feet by the force of the collision. There was no time for words, no chance to shoot because Chad wanted to make sure of catching his prisoner alive.

As the horses reeled and began to lurch apart before bunching together again and starting a mad, breakneck gallop down the gully, Chad, his gun holstered now, made a leap from his saddle and flung his arms round the rider's shoulders. One glance at close quarters was enough to tell Chad that this was indeed Phil Davidson.

Davidson struggled to get free and managed to throw a fist at Chad's face. Chad slipped from his precarious hold, his arms still tightly wound around Davidson, and his legs fell downward, all his weight pulling Davidson from the saddle. Davidson heeled over. Chad felt him falling just as the two horses started gathering

speed. Chad let go and fell lightly on his back.

Davidson had freed one foot from his stirrup, but the other, on the side to which he was falling, stayed entangled. The horse gathered speed and Davidson's shoulders struck the rock with a force that shook the wind from him, but still the foot remained caught. The horse dragged him along for a few yards and he yelled at the top of his voice. Then his foot twisted clear of the iron and he rolled over a couple of times and lay still.

Chad picked himself up and went cautiously down to Davidson, who began to stir as he arrived. He snarled at Chad, and made a dive for Chad's legs. Chad fell on top of him and drove his fist into Davidson's face. Davidson worked a foot upward and planted it in Chad's groin and kicked out viciously. Chad went over on to his back and lay there, gasping for breath. His hand fell on to the top of his gun-butt, and he jerked his head up so that he could keep an eye on Davidson. The killer scrambled to his feet, groaning as he did so, and he stood crookedly, with one shoulder hanging below the other. It looked, too, as if he couldn't straighten his back. Chad winced at the pain in his groin and got up and rushed at Davidson. He kicked Davidson's shins and then slammed punches at his face in a frenzy of fury, and then he stamped on Davidson's foot. The killer howled. He tried to hit back, but he'd lost the use of his left arm, and the punch he swung with his right was gawky, unfinished and wide of the mark.

As he punched, Davidson left himself wide open to attack. Chad saw the awkwardness of Davidson's attack and guessed that the man's bruised back must be causing him a good deal of trouble. He watched for his moment and stepped in with a right-handed blow that packed all of Chad's height and weight behind it, the expression of his hatred for this man who had killed an innocent cowpuncher for no other reason than to frame Chad for murder.

DAVIDSON staggered back and spat out a mouthful of blood and broken teeth. He moaned and let out a gasp of breath.

"This is goin' to hurt, killer!" Chad said between his teeth, and his left fist flashed out. Davidson took it on the chin and went over as if he'd been struck dead. He hit the ground and lay still.

Chad breathed hard and rubbed his bruises and squatted down beside Davidson's still form. He pulled out a sack of tobacco, made a cigarette and struck a match with a shaking hand. He drew in a half-dozen drags of tobacco-smoke, and then rested back on his elbows, his eyes searching Davidson for a sign of recovery. He reached forward and yanked the gun from the unconscious man's holster, and on second thought palmed his own shooter and balanced it easily in front of him. It was half-an-hour before Davidson began to stir.

Then Davidson sat up and rubbed his chin and spat out more blood. "What the blazes!" he muttered to himself, and then he turned his head to regard Chad with bitter hatred. "What the hell do you want? Who the hell are you, anyway?" He took a better look at Chad and then let out a sort of whistle and said, "You!"

Chad said laconically, "Me!"

Davidson was on his guard at once. "What you want, Browning?" he asked cautiously.

"You could try a guess," Chad said grimly.

Davidson scowled. "Get out of the country and you'll be safe enough. What the devil are you hangin' round for?"

"This happens to be my home town," Chad said.

"For cryin' out loud! You done time for a killin', ain't you?" He spat.

"You can't go gettin' sentimental when you're a killer."

Chad breathed hard and resisted the impulse to knock Davidson out again. He said, "What're you doin' up here? I know you work for Lomarts, so it ain't any use tryin' to fool me."

"I took a wrong turnin'," Davidson said sullenly.

Chad hit him again, this time with relish.

Davidson's head sagged and then straightened. "You filthy..."

Chad hit him again.

Davidson's head shook like a prairie grass in the breeze. Chad said, "I want to know what dealin's you got with Bart Browning."

It was a long shot. Chad had been doing some guessing while he'd been waiting for Davidson to recover consciousness. He knew from what John Paige had told him that old Bart Browning still lived in the mountains in a cave, like a hermit. He remembered that old John had said only he knew Bart's whereabouts and that he still lived, but he didn't overlook the fact that John Paige had been forced to keep inside his quarters for a long time now, that he could easily have been mistaken on that point. It was however, a shot that struck a mark.

DAVIDSON sent him a glance that told him volumes. It was a look compounded of surprise, of apprehension, of fear.

"We're goin' back to talk to Bart," Chad said gently. "Get up!"

Davidson dragged himself slowly up to his feet and stood shakily in front of Chad. Chad said, "Get goin', and don't waste time!"

Chad's gun was in his hand, urging the man along. Davidson could walk at only a slow pace, but Chad had no mercy on him, forced him to stumble along at a pace that must have sent pains darting through every muscle of his body. "Ease up, feller! I ain't made of iron!" Davidson snarled.

"You'll wish you were before I'm through with you," Chad said implacably, and gave him a shove in the back.

Davidson cursed furiously and kept up a string of abuses in time with the marching of his feet until Chad grew tired of it and said, "Quit it or I'll stop your mouth for good!"

They moved on up a rise in the gully's floor and then came into the canyon where it broadened and thin vegetation grew from a light soil made up mostly of rock-sand. A high rim of rock rose up on three sides of the box canyon, shutting out the glimmer of night light, giving the impression that they were already entering the mouth of a vast cave. Chad walked warily now, knowing that his prisoner was more familiar with the terrain than he was, watching him for a sign that would indicate the entrance of Bart Browning's cave. They sloshed through some mud, and Chad guessed that a weak mountain spring must originate here and supply Bart with water. It would be scarcely more than seepage because not a trickle of it passed down to the mesa below.

Chad's senses were alert for a change in Davidson's direction. Shortly afterward, Chad felt a hesitation about Davidson's steps, saw him begin to turn off to their right, and Chad followed without a pause.

His feet stumbled against steps when they were close to the canyon wall. Warily he climbed them, pushing Davidson ahead to test the path. Then they turned into the wall, passing through a sheer-walled cleft until they were in a kind of tunnel. Chad felt the fresh air blowing against his face as they walked through the utter darkness. They turned a sharp bend in the tunnel, and then came out under the open sky again. In front of them blazed a campfire.

Chad blinked his eyes until they were used to the light, and then he

saw a tall, gaunted figure with a long black beard, stooping slightly as he came out from under a canopy of rock.

Bart Browning's voice called out, "Who's there? Come on into the light where I can see yuh!"

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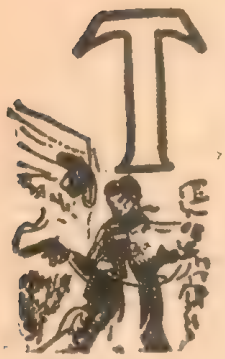

THE LEAN, rangy old outlaw held a rifle across his waist, his face peering forward into the darkness.

Chad cried out, "Uncle Bart! I've brought your visitor back to see you again."

"Eh?" The old man stared at the faced of Chad and Davidson reflected now in the firelight. His voice was thin and cracked with phlegm; after every few words he had to clear his throat, which he did with a good deal of noise, and spit, preferably into the red heart of the fire. "Uncle Bart, you said?" He stared at Chad and let out a whoop, "Chad Browning! you're back, you're back! You stayed away a long time, son. Where you been all these years?"

Chad drawled, "I figured Logan had had a bellyful of the Brownings, Bart, so I stayed away after I came out of Yuma. Two days ago I found out I was right about my hunch."

Bart Browning had lowered his rifle. "You know this hombre?"

"Only met him once before," Chad said dryly. "And we didn't get around to talkin' about our folks."

Phil Davidson stood silent, Chad's gun still in his ribs, out of sight of Bart Browning.

Bart peered at Davidson's sullen, battered face. "You maybe showed Chad the way up here? He wouldn't found it by himself."

"Aw, cut out this play-actin' and get down to business!" Davidson snarled. "Can't you see I'm under the gun, you old fool?"

Bart stared at him, then at Chad. At full height, Bart Browning was over six feet, but his neck and the top of his spine were bent over and from living in the cave, which was an inch or two too low for the old man. Thus it was that he gave the impression of a bird of prey, staring, except that his eyes had lost their brilliance and now he had to stare long and hard before he could see clearly, especially in the half-darkness of the firelight.

The look he threw at Chad sharpened, and there was a hint of alarm in his voice as he said. "You ain't turned lawdog, Chad?"

Chad shook his head. "You got no worry on that score."

Bart breathed with relief. "Then it's all right, Chad. Put your gun down, boy. Phil's an old friend of mine. He sure gets around, don't you, Phil?"

Davidson grunted, but made no answer.

Bart turned on Chad, his eyes flashing. "What's this about, Chad?"

"Your 'old friend' tried to frame me for murder last night," Chad drawled. "How well do you know him, Bart?"

The old outlaw's eyes narrowed. "Reckon you must be makin' a mistake, son," Bart said.

Chad made a gesture. "That's not what I came for, anyway. I want your help, Bart. You'll remember the killin' of Sheriff Coutts twelve years ago, Bart. I want to know this. Did I kill him or didn't I?"

Bart stared at him, lost for words. "You was put in the pen for it, Chad," he said slowly, his eyes staring now at the flickering of the fire.

CHAD'S MIND was racing. He began to reconstruct the scene in a blazing attempt to jog some chord in the old man's memory.

"We had a raid planned on the east-

bound mail train at the Drummond switch. Coutts was expectin' a raid, but he couldn't stop us getting the bullion away. Three chests of gold dust and a payroll. Mac took over the signal box and stopped the train and we just stuck our guns into those train guards. That was when Sheriff Coutts and his posse turned up. They got all of us except you and me and Tod Lomarts. We streaked up here to a hideout in the rocks. There was only Coutts on our tail. Lomarts wanted to double back and finish him off there and then. You said, 'No,' and I don't remember much of what happened after that because Coutts slammed a shot into my back that went close to finishin' me off. All I remember after that is comin' to once in the cave, with you an' Lomarts a-standin' and arguin' not far off. Next thing I knew there was a posse there and Sheriff Coutts was dead, shot with my gun that was still in my right hand. You and Lomarts were gone. And in the back of my left shoulder was a bullet out of Coutts' gun."

Bart Browning listened intently, nodding his shaggy head after every few words as though in agreement.

Bart said slowly, "We didn't show up for a long while after that. But we got word o' your sentence sometime after. Tod reckoned there warn't nothin' we could do about springin' you from the calaboose. . ."

"I never thought you'd run out on me, Bart, and leave me to the law."

"Hell, you know I wouldn't Chad!" Bart said fiercely. "Tod figured we ought-a get out an' try to lead the posse away from the cave. We couldn't-a held 'em, an' we couldn't-a shifted you. You was too bad hurt."

"Tod had plenty ideas."

"He sure did." There was a trace of bitterness in the old man's voice. "He took the outfit over after you went away. . . ."

"Yeah?" This was interesting news to Chad.

"Best part of the twelve year you been away, I been holed up here," Bart said sorrowfully. His eyes brightened as he added, "Phil and me have got a job on now. We're gonna bust the bank at Logan."

Chad stared at him in disbelief. Davidson twisted his mouth, but held his tongue.

Bart rattled on. "Bart Browning rides again! His last ride," he added soberly.

Chad said, "Watch out for that marshal," and then swung back to his questioning. "You tried to head off that posse. Was Sheriff Coutts around when you rode outa the cave?"

Bart's eyes narrowed. "What you gettin' at, young Chad?" he growled.

"The truth, Uncle Bart," Chad said sharply.

BART SHRUGGED and said, "I don't rightly remember it all now, but I guess Coutts must-a been close or he wouldn't of winged you in the back. Reckon he must-a seen us ride out. Maybe he figured you was so bad hurt you couldn't get away."

"Maybe Lomarts figured the same," Chad said flatly. "But that still don't explain why Coutts got gutshot—unless I did it without rememberin' it. I don't believe I did. And I reckon you're a liar, Bart!"

Bart Browning muttered a curse and walked moodily way from the fire, and in that instant when Chad's attention wandered ever so slightly toward the old man and he forgot the man standing close beside him, Phil Davidson made his bid for freedom.

Chad suddenly felt his gun being knocked from his grasp. It plummeted into the dark shadows of the cave, to be lost until the sunlight crept in next morning. Chad's hand flashed for his other gun, but Phil was on top of him before the gun could be unholstered. Davidson's weight crashed him

against the side wall of the cave, jarring every bone in his body.

Bart spun round, the look of the hunted animal on his face. He jumped for his carbine and lifted it against the rock ceiling of the cave, preparing to bring its butt end down into the midst of the two fighting men. Chad struggled to get his gun free, but Davidson was pinning his wrist back against the wall and now he pounded at Chad with his free hand, trying to keep Chad's other arm occupied so he couldn't draw his gun, and trying to batter Chad's head against the rock. Chad braced his back against the wall and lashed out with his boot. Davidson turned the move to his own advantage with a stab at Chad's upraised ankle that was quick as thought. He took a grip on the ankle and wrenched viciously and with every ounce of his power at Chad's half-extended leg. Chad lost his balance and lurched sideways. Davidson's grip on his gun-wrist never slackened. Chad ended in a confused, irregular heap on the floor. Davidson pounced on him, knowing that he had to knock Chad out now or never. His fingers laced round Chad's neck, and he packed all his strength into his forearms as he lifted Chad's head and shoulders from the floor and drove him smashing down again. Chad shook his head groggily, but his hands were free now.

The movement was painfully slow by contrast with his usual gunfighting speed, but he drove his hand down to the holstered gun on his thigh. He didn't attempt to draw. He turned the barrel of the Colt upward by moving his thigh through an upward arc. With one finger, Chad felt the aim and direction of the barrel, pointed the gun at Davidson's body and released the trigger.

The report sounded like an explosion of a charge of dynamite in that confined space. Billows of smoke and fumes punched away from the locked bodies of the two men. Davidson gave a long sigh that was half a moan and went limp on top of Chad.

Chad released the gun and freed his neck from the clutch of Davidson's fingers. Then he rolled aside, letting the slack body of the killer hit the floor of the cave and after that lie perfectly still while a puddle of blood collected under him.

Bart Browning lowered his carbine as Chad got to his feet. The gun in his holster jumped into his hand as Chad turned then to stare at the old man. "Did you have anything to do with that?" he demanded, his voice harsh and forced out as if the sounds had to pass over a rough rasp instead of his throat.

Bart dropped the carbine as if it were red-hot and his fingers already blistered. "Nope, Chad. Not me. I swear I didn't—"

Chad breathed hard. "I wish I knowed what to do with you, Bart. I guess you'll do least harm if you just go on livin' up here. But I warn you I ain't stopping until I find the killer of Sheriff Coutts—"

"I'll sure help you all I can, son," old Bart said hollowly.

The tension relaxed inside Chad and he suddenly laughed. "I'd surely like to eat," he said.

Bart Browning jumped to get some food and in a short time they were squatting round the fire. Chad ate hungrily and when the meal was over he went out into the cool of the night. Bart kept throwing uneasy glances towards him, but Chad ventured no conversation now, his thoughts busy with the connection between Lomarts, Davidson, Bart Browning and the plan to raid the Logan bank.

He drawled at last: "Better get some sleep, Bart. I'm waitin' for the dawn. After that, I've got some business with Lomarts!"

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WHEN DELLA came from her bedroom into the living room the next morning she found her father, old John Paige, asleep in his chair.

She called out, "Daddy!" her voice tinged with alarm, feeling half-ashamed that she had slept throughout the night while he had made the journey up the mountains to Bart Browning's hiding place.

Old John opened his eyes and passed a hand across them, blinking guiltily at her. He murmured, "I waited for him but he never came back," The next instant, he was fully awake and he repeated what he had just said. He saw the anxious concern in Della's eyes change to an expression of thankfulness.

She said softly, "He didn't come back?"

"I waited till half-way through the night," old John muttered, as though finding an excuse for himself. "I don't know what could have happened to him. I didn't hear no shooting or commotion outside."

"Maybe he went alone," Della said softly, a subtle change appearing in her voice.

"Dang it, he wouldn't know how to git there!" old John said testily. "Why didn't he come back?"

"Well, up you get and have a wash," she said, briskly turning the subject. "You'll have to get a rest in today after being up half the night. Off you go while I get the breakfast."

John Paige stabbed at his food in his anxiety for Chad. Della watched him covertly, studying the expression on his face of anxiety. She found herself wondering at the fact that her father was plainly so concerned for Chad Browning. In the heat of her feeling, she had first thought that he was just mistaken because she knew that her father wouldn't care a rap for a man as bad as Chad Browning had at first appeared to her. Yet, she reflected, he'd known Chad as a youngster, known that he'd become involved with train-busters. Her father knew Chad Browning a whole lot better than she did, yet he still didn't believe Chad was a killer or the sort of tough hand who easily drops to that level.

After the heat and the emotion of the day before, it was only natural that Della began now to question herself. And she remembered Chad's passionate protestations of his innocence. She remembered how, even then, that his words had carried such a ring of sincerity that she'd been affected by them.

Once she had started questioning herself about Chad, she had of necessity to think of Lomarts. It was like a shock of cold water even to consider that Tod Lomarts might not be all the things she had fancied him, all the things he's so assiduously striven to appear. How empathically he'd made the point that the shooting of Sheriff Coutts had taken place before he'd even been in Logan. She remembered that he hadn't actually said whether or not he'd been in the district then. He'd just pointed out that if it had been before the branch railroad line had been built, it must have been before his time. . . !

She caught her breath, hating to find a place in her mind for such doubts. So much else was at stake. She thought of his gracious mode of living, the lovely, long, low ranchhouse where his old servants poured them tea on the terrace. She thought of his kindnesses to her, his consideration.

She thought of the security of being married to him, although the prospect of his love made her a little uncertain. She had a feeling that he would be wildly demanding, that to be loved by Tod Lomarts would be a frightening rather than a satisfying experience. Suddenly she realised that Lomarts was cold, that everything he did was shrewdly calculated, that nothing he did was sincere, coming from the heart.

She put a resolute stop to her thoughts and became aware that her father was looking at her now, and she wondered if he knew what had passed through her mind. He gave her a warm smile that reassured her, but she decided to keep her thoughts to herself.

Even so, she betrayed herself to her father's eyes when she said, "I'm going out this morning, Daddy. I want to have a talk with Tod—"

DELLA OPENED the front door of Tod Lomarts' office on Logan's main street and walked in. Lomarts was sitting at his desk, browsing through papers, an intent frown on his face, and he looked up at her, his face clearing and brightening into a smile.

It seemed to Della that there was a tight knot in her stomach as she strove to find words for what she had to say. Coming face to face with Lomart's made her realise that it wasn't going to be as easy as when she'd framed the words in her mind. How could she question him? Wouldn't he at once think that she was doubting him? Yet she told herself that she had to know. She knew that if she loved Lomarts and if she were to continue loving him she must have no doubts.

Her face was tensed and serious. Lomarts stopped smiling, and a questioning look came into his eyes. Now she was hoping fervently that he would give her an immediate answer which would sweep away all trace of doubt once and for all.

She opened her mouth, fought for words and then burst forth impulsively: "Tod! Don't think me disloyal!"

"Della," he murmured. "What could possibly give me such a false impression?"

Della stammered and bit her lip. This was a habit of Tod's to break in with a comment or compliment. She'd noticed before how it shifted the focus of the conversation on to him, limelighting him, and often destroyed the drift of what she had been about to say. Now it confused her and she felt an irritation where before she had been tolerant of his ways, grateful enough that he should be interested in her at all.

She said sharply, "If you will listen to me, Tod, I'll tell you what's on my mind." She paused, and this time he waited for her to go on. "You remember Chad Browning called on Daddy when he came back?"

"You told me so," Lomarts murmured, his eyes narrowly studying the sheaf of papers held in his left hand now. He was waiting to know what she would say next.

"Daddy knew him well when Browning was a boy," she went on. Now she hesitated for the fraction of a second. "Browning insists that you were with him in the train-robbing gang, Tod."

Lomarts' face was grey and drawn and he tried to appear unconcerned. She regarded him curiously, a strange fear nagging at her inside.

Lomarts said, "Why? Why should he say that?" His voice a little uneven.

"He says he didn't kill that Sheriff," Della said quietly.

Lomarts laughed without gaiety. "What? Does he figure that I did it? I heard some stories in my time, but that beats them all! I thought a killer

like him would have been tough... But I guess these cheap gun-handlers are all yellow under the skin."

"One thing about Chad Browning," Della said with quiet conviction. "He's not yellow."

"All right, my dear," Lomarts protested, laughing. "I don't know the fellow."

"Never met him before, Tod?"

"Get hold of him and stand him face to face with me. You'll find out that way. You don't have to be a doctor to know what non-recognition looks like on a man's face. I wouldn't know Chad Browning from the reward dodger that Marshal Soames got out for him, because I've never seen him before in my life as far as I know."

"Thank you, Tod," she said quietly. "You understand. I had to know. After Browning said that Sheriff Coutts was murdered there were three in the cave with him: Chad Browning, Bart Browning—and you."

Tod Lomarts came round from behind the desk. "My dear, sweetest Della! Of course I understand."

He came close to her, then suddenly put his arms around her and drew her tightly to him until he could feel the contours of her body pressed against his. She felt a momentary tremor, and then his lips were upon hers, hungrily demanding gratification. She abandoned herself to his kiss and when it was over she stepped back, gasping, the blood pounding through her veins.

"I must go now, Tod," she said quietly. She turned, and walked toward the door and went out to the street.

On her way back to their rooms over the saddlery store, Della seemed to be walking in a dream. There was a thought going round and round in her mind that she could not dismiss.

She didn't believe Lomarts.

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AS THE dawn broke, cold and grey, over the mountain hideout of Bart Browning, Chad was standing against a rock, immobile like a statue. When the light crept into the mouth of the cave and fell upon the elongated, still figure of the old outlaw leader sleeping on an old sheet of sacking, his head cupped in his elbow, Chad moved quietly to his side and shook him into waking.

Bart grunted and moaned softly through half-parted lips as Chad pounded his shoulder. He sat up quickly.

Chad knelt down beside him, his eyes fixed on the old man's face. "Uncle Bart," he said. "D'you get any other visitors up here?"

Bart Browning stared at him blankly. "Nope," he said straight out, driven to a direct answer by the unexpectedness of the question.

"Did you know that Phil Davidson worked for Lomarts?"

There was no mistaking the terror in Bart's face now. The old man struggled to get up, and Chad stood up with him, close in front of him, staring hard at him, face to face.

In the last hours of darkness, Chad had been struck by the thought that Bart Browning might not have known of Davidson's connection with Lomarts. Chad himself had only reached that conclusion because of the attempt to frame him for murder, and it was apparent that Davidson wasn't known in Logan as a Lomarts' man. To clinch it, Chad had searched Davidson's pockets and found two letters from Lomarts on business. Now he showed them to Bart Browning, one addressed to

St. Louis, the other to Pittsburgh. Both of them touched on the real estate market and the proposal to bring settlers out to Logan, and gave Davidson instructions such as a travelling agent would receive from his employer.

Bart Browning's face was grey. "Lomarts!" he repeated. He started babbling a froth of words from his mouth then. "Chad, keep him away from here! I told you last night that Lomarts took over the gang after you left. He sure did! Reckoned I was too old for the job, pushed me right out. The time came when he wanted to turn respectable and wipe out all that was left of the gang. We got a new bunch after you went to the pen. They never knew Lomarts. He worked through me so no one knew who he was. All the old bunch was dead 'cept you, and you were in the pen, and me. Lomarts made one big haul and then chucked in his hand. He told me to get outa the country and not come back, else I'd finish up stiff in Boothill..."

The old man turned his horror-struck eyes on Davidson's stiff body while Chad listened in silence.

"Davidson turned up and pitched me the yarn he was a driftin' cowpoke. The long and the short of it was I gave him the best part o' my share in the loot, and he reckoned he'd keep me stocked up with what I needed up here." The old man broke off again. Chad stared at him in wonderment, knowing that the old, fearless fighter and one-time outlaw leader had lost his reason years back under Lomarts' threats. He'd gone mad with fear, and Chad pitied him.

BART WENT on, "And all the time Lomarts was behind it, keepin' me here like a lobo in a cage, so's he could finish me off any time he pleased!" His voice cracked.

Chad had been waiting for the right moment, and now he cut in, his voice low and hard.

"Did Tod Lomarts kill Sheriff Coutts?"

The old man broke down. "Yes" he almost sobbed. "And I let them jail you for it, Chad! You was like my own son, and I let them do that to you! I was crazy a-feared of Lomarts, Chad ...I—I guess I didn't know which way to turn, I..."

Chad's lips were tight, his face pale, as he thought back to his trial, the hopes he had that Bart would have burst into the courtroom at Drummond to give evidence of his innocence, the dying of those hopes and the harsh, sweltering years inside the hopeless prison walls of Yuma, the emptiness and the waste of all those years, and he found it hard to forgive the old man, bent and drooping in craven fear and remorse in front of him. But forgive him he did, and all his hatred turned to Lomarts, who had been the cause of it all—to Tod Lomarts whose influence had made him what he was that even without knowing him Della Paige had turned away from him in disgust.

Bart was staring at Davidson's body again. "Gotta get rid of—it," he said hollowly. "Lomarts'll know he was comin' up here. When he don't turn up, Lomarts'll come himself, or send some gunnie. He'll get rid of me now!"

Chad said tensely, "Davidson wanted you to make a raid on the bank. Did he say why?"

Bart looked at him vacantly. "The bank? Oh sure! He said he'd get a couple more owlhooters he knowed and we'd bust it easy. I was goin' to lead 'em in, just the way I used to with the old bunch when we busted them trains, Chad!"

"Sure, but why'd they want to raid the bank, anyway? Don't you reckon there'd be a special reason why Lomarts would want the bank busted?"

"Lomarts! I hadn't cottoned on to that, Chad!" Bart seemed to be searching his brain. "Yeah, I remember! Phil reckoned there'd be a record pile

of deposits this week. Goin' in tomorrer, he reckoned. He was goin' to come back after he'd fixed up the other two owlhooters."

Chad broke in excitedly. "Tomorrow!" he hooted. "Lomarts would know all about that! I guess tomorrows the day for the homesteaders to arrive! You can bet your boots and saddle he's goin' to put up some scheme and get 'em all to put their money in the bank!"

Bart's eyes gleamed and he said, "The dirty sidewinder! If I could get my hands on his lilywhite neck—"

"Maybe you'll get the chance, Bart," Chad said determinedly. "You got horses up here?"

"I got one horse. Back o' the box canyon."

"One horse'll have to do," Chad said grimly. "This is where we saddle up and ride down to Logan! This is just the chance we want, Bart! Tell them settlers they was fixin' to be robbed and there'll be hell to pay. And this is one time when Lomarts'll have to pay up!"

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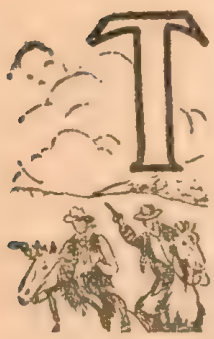

THERE WERE banners on the streets of Logan, crying out "Welcome" to the new settlers. Men and women and little packs of children stood on sidewalks and scurried through the dust to catch a glimpse of and call out a greeting to the newcoming families. Marshal Soames patrolled the main street, walking endlessly up and down while he was waiting for the train to come churning along the single-track branch line from Drummond to pull in beside Logan's stock pens, which were the official location of the station. A wave of excitement ran through the town as the train came into sight, preceded by a cloud of dense smoke from the stack, and the marshal moved now in agitation, his eyes scanning the houses and the sidewalks for a sign of disturbance, his hand close to his hogleg, ready to quell the slightest form of disorder that might mar the appearance of the town to the settlers as they stepped down from the passenger cars.

Tod Lomarts was prominent in smooth, perfectly pressed grey, a top hat of the same color gracing his handsome head.

There was no business done in Logan this morning, and the school marm had declared the day a public holiday. Logan was on its toes to impress the new arrivals. The stage was set for Lomarts' biggest triumph, the glory which would crown him undisputed leader of affairs in the whole county. Folks said gleefully, "Logan'll show Drummond the way," and, "We'll be county seat after this." And someone said, "We ought to be mighty thankful to Mister Tod Lomarts..."

A hush fell over the town as the train hauled into Logan's siding. Men, women and children with bags, sacks, trunks and massive, iron-bound boxes piled out on to the cinder track and stood like lost sheep until Lomarts presented himself to them.

There were cheers when he told them they would find every welcome from the residents of Logan, and that a free meal was waiting for them in the towns best eating house. After that, he told them, he would be happy if they would all go along to the school hall, where he had something to tell them about their land holdings and the arrangements he'd made for the land agent to come in and register their deeds.

He strutted back along the cinder path then towards the town, with the settlers following behind him in a crowd, their luggage left in safe hands at the "station." He was like the lead-

er of a military band in his self-importance, and perhaps not a little unlike the Pied Piper, such was the interest and the admiration with which the new settlers followed close behind his heels.

After their meal, the homesteaders gathered in their twos and threes and family groups and gradually filled the school hall, waiting for Lomarts to speak to them. There was a hush as the handsomely dressed man appeared on the platform and turned to address them. Marshal Soames spoke a handful of dry words, welcoming them, and introducing Lomarts.

"Now, my friends," Lomarts began, "you have experienced in a practical form what Western hospitality means. We're all one big family out here..." And then he went on to tell them of his plan for a ceremony of handing over the title deeds of their land.

"Friends, I realise that you'll have a lot of money with you which you'll want to leave in safe keeping. Let me tell you that the bank in Logan is safer than the National Bank. Our bank never goes broke! And, so that you can feel that your money is safe until the land agent arrives, for your convenience, folks, the bank will be open all day today for you to deposit your cash!"

A THUNDEROUS cheer rolled among the hall's rafters, and Lomarts smiled.

The speeches rolled on, and all the settlers enjoyed themselves, feeling that they were indeed about to start a bright new life here, among friends, away from the fierce competition and the narrow strips of land they'd toiled on in their Eastern homelands. Some of them were new imigrants from Europe, and all this seemed like a dream, long yearned for, which had now come true.

All the time Tod Lomarts smiled.

The streets were half-deserted after the morning's crush when Chad and Bart, riding one behind the other, loped easily up to the town's outskirts. Dismounting down along the trail, they covered the last of the distance on foot.

At first, Chad had thought that they would be able to mingle with the crowds and pass unnoticed, but with no sign of the newly-arrived settlers he knew that Bart's long beard and emanciated-looking face would soon call attention to them, and Chad couldn't afford to be recognized at this stage. An occasional pillar of black smoke from the direction of the banners on the street gave an indication of the welcome they'd received.

Chad guided the old man off the trail just before it became the main street, and led him along the way Chad had used the last time he'd called on John Paige. They met no one at the rear of the street's buildings, and they passed without trouble through the alley and joined on to the main street again, near the corner of Pop Lowery's saddlery shop. A few men stood about ten yards along the street, beside an awning post, but no one interfered with them as they slipped quickly on to the boardwalk and into the entrance hall of John Paige's quarters.

Chad knocked on the door, his heart quickening with a nameless pleasure as well as a sort of sick apprehension at the sound of Della's feet approaching the door. His hand hesitated over his gunbutt, but he did not want to antagonize her further, now that the end of his quest was in sight.

Next instant the door was open and Della standing there. Chad said wearily, "I want to talk to John, urgent..." when he saw, or rather sensed, a subtle change in her manner, a hesitation that had been absent from her bearing before, when she had been so sure of herself, so self-righteous in her manner. She eyed him from head to toe quite brazenly, and he felt himself beginning to blush, a sensation he'd hardly known before.

"You've—come—back," she faltered. She gave a sudden laugh. "Tod Lomarts figured you were yellow!"

"Della," Chad said quietly. "I've got somethin' important to tell your father, and you, too, if you're interested." He stood aside. "And I've got someone here to back up what I say—"

She looked into the semi-darkness of the corridor and distinguished the rangy figure of Bart Browning standing at the back of Chad and to one side. She gave a little start at the sight of his rather fearsome, bearded, hollowed-eyed face, and then said in a low voice, "Better come inside."

Chad knew with certainty now that her attitude had changed, and he wondered at the cause of it, and he rejoiced, too.

Bart Browning and John Paige stared at each other across the room. Chad said nothing while the two old-timers greeted each other, half in hostility and half in a fellowship of old age shared.

"I come to repair a wrong I did," Bart said in a choked voice. Chad began to admire him now. It took guts to say that to a man who'd wanted to be a father to Chad, who would have made a better job of bringing up the boy than Bart had done. Bart seemed to acknowledge that, and wanted now to make amends.

Chad stole a glance at Della's face, saw her eyes wide, waiting with keened ears for what the old man had to say.

"TOD LOMARTS it was who killed the Sheriff!" Bart cried out, his voice like a cry of a wounded beast. "Chad was lyin' unconcious in the cave and Lomarts planted the gun on him to make it look like he done it. I saw it all, and I let him do it. I let them send Chad away to the pen for five years!" The old man reached for a chair and sank into it, his whole wasted body shaking with sparsely controlled emotion. "My own boy!" he whispered. Half in sorrow, half in defiance.

"Tell them the whole story, Uncle Bart," Chad said.

And so Bart told his story, the story of his own violence and lawlessness, and the story of Tod Lomarts' influence on him and the new gang of outlaws and the grip of terror that Lomarts had maintained on him, through, he now knew, the agency of Phil Davidson.

Chad said, "Davidson killed Hank Matthews," and told them how he'd spotted Davidson the night he'd last called on old John, and how he'd trailed the man up to Bart Browning's hide-out.

"Where's Lomarts now?" Chad asked harshly.

"In the school hall," Della told him, and Chad thought she never looked lovelier. "He's got a scheme for a ceremonial handing over of the title deeds, and I believe he's advising them all to bank their money—"

"Tell them!" Chad said triumphantly. "Tell them what Davidson arranged with you, Bart."

"He fixed it with me that we was to bust the bank. He said there be a whole packet o' dinero in the safe after today."

Della listened in silence.

Old John cleared his throat and said slowly, "Della, I figure it'ud be best if you went down to the school hall and called up Marshal Soames."

She nodded silently and slipped away.

Della reached the hall just as Lomarts had finished a speech, and he was sitting on a chair beside the Marshal, while the families in the hall were chattering happily and excitedly. She pushed her way along the side of the hall and came quickly to the dais. Lomarts gave her a warm smile and whispered, "Everything's going fine." She had to control herself to prevent showing him her feelings. She was almost convinced now of his guilt, but she knew that this thing would have to be

played right out, and she didn't want to give him any encouragement nor any reason for doubt at this stage.

She smiled back at Lomarts, and then spoke softly to Soames. "Would you come out and see John? He wanted to see you urgently, Marshal."

Soames looked at Lomarts, who nodded and said, "Any trouble, Della?"

"I don't know anything about it," she said truthfully.

Marshal Soames went with her, and Lomarts called out, "Perhaps I could call on you later, Della?"

For a moment, the look on Della's face was one of pure fear, but by the time she turned to face Lomarts, she was composed and she said, "Yes, Tod," and then hurried away from the hall.

She wouldn't tell the Marshal anything of what was afoot on the way across to the saddle shop. He followed her up the stairs and entered the rooms.

Old John Paige sat in the centre, rocking slightly in his chair. At his back, one on each side, stood Bart Browning and Chad. There was a gun in Chad's hand, hanging loosely at his side.

Marshal Soames halted and stiffened immediately on sight of him. He plainly did not recognise Bart. "What sort of trick is this?" he demanded gruffly.

"Tell him, John," Chad said softly.

John Paige spoke, choosing his words with slow care. "We only want your co-operation, Fred," he said at the end. "I want you and Della to go in that room and listen to what Lomarts has to say when he sees Chad and Bart here together, and he knows that his scheme to rob the bank has fallen flat and that we know all about it—"

Chad cut in, "If that don't convince you, Marshal, I'm prepared to stay and face a murder count for Hank Matthews."

"I'll listen," Soames said curtly. "I don't like it. But I figure it can't do any harm. You got the drop on me now anyway. All right, I'll do it."

Della was aware of the plan now, and she opened the door of her bedroom; a few minutes later she came out again and said, "You can come in now, Marshal."

Soames colored faintly, but followed her without a word or a backward glance at the three grouped men in the living room.

Outside, the shadows of the town's buildings began to lengthen into dark, creeping shapes over the flats.

As the time passed, the five waiting people in John Paige's rooms grew tenser and ever tenser.

IT WAS some time between five and six when Chad Browning heard the sounds of crowds in the street, and he crossed to the window and saw the settlers pouring across the vacant allotments at the back of which the school hall stood.

Chad nodded at the other two. "They're out," he said tersely. "He shouldn't be long now."

More minutes passed, and then all nerves tensed, and Chad brought his gun up in line with the short entrance passage leading from the front door. Chad and Bart kept out of line of sight from anyone standing at the

front door, waited while John Paige hoisted himself from his chair and limped to the door.

The footsteps came along the passage and before old John was halfway to the door, the knocking came.

The only sound was the tapping of old John's stick, the shuffling of his feet, and his slow, labored breathing. Then he reached the door, opened it. "Come inside, Tod."

Lomarts' voice said, "Is Della in?"

"She's out for a minute or two," old John said easily. "She asked you to wait. Go right ahead."

John Paige stood behind Lomarts and closed the door, and limped behind him as he started walking toward the living room.

Tod Lomarts drew up to a dead halt when he saw into the living room. He started to spin round on his heel to confront old John Paige, but stopped again at the commencement of the action when Chad said, "Don't move a muscle, Lomarts!" The gun was trained on Lomarts' belly. "Come over here."

Lomarts walked slowly to the centre of the room, and John Paige passed by him and returned to his rocker chair.

"What's this all about?" Lomarts asked hoarsely.

"It speaks for itself, don't it Lomarts?" Chad said harshly. "Your scheme failed! The sodbusters aren't going to lose your deposits... Don't move!"

"What do you want, Chad Browning?"

"I thought you'd recognise me, Tod, even after all these years. If you'd let me alone I might have drifted on out of Logan. But you couldn't. You were so damn' scared I'd upset your schemes you had to hurry gettin' rid of me. You always were ambitious, Tod. You sure got on since you let me go to Yuma for the killin' you did. But I fancy this is as far as you're goin'."

Lomarts began to recover himself and his confidence. "What proof have you got?" he sneered. "A couple of outlaws, that's all you are. "Who's goin' to take any notice of you?"

Bart said thickly, "I got enough dinero a-cached away in them mountains to fight a law case. The least I can do is throw it in—the whole dang lot of it—and by hokey it'll hurt your fine reputation if it don't stretch your neck for you. I saw you kill Sheriff Coutts, Lomarts!"

"And how long do you think you'd live, Bart?" Lomarts said thinly. "You have to wait a long while for a big trial."

"YOU WON'T be doin' any more killin', Lomarts. No more will Davidson. We got him hogtied. And he talked. He'll talk more to get his neck out of a hang noose, too!"

"Damn you!" Lomarts screamed. "I tell you, you can't prove a thing!"

"Maybe we wouldn't have to prove it, Lomarts, if that crowd of settlers got wind of your plan to rob the bank. They mightn't take it very kindly, after all your speeches of welcome and all that!"

"All right!" Lomarts snarled, "if that's the way you want it!"

His hand flashed inside his coat for a sneak-gun in a shoulder holster, but before he could drag it free, Chad's gun had fired a shot at him. The slug caught him high in the right arm as it folded across his body to grip the sneak-gun, and smashed clear through the bone. Lomarts screamed with pain, and his shattered arm fell away to his side, his expensive suit ripped and beginning to discolor with blood.

A door opened behind him. Soames came slowly into the living room, his big service Colt pointed at Lomarts' body.

"I guess it was the only way, Lomarts," he said, his voice hard as metal. "You had everyone fooled, including me. I'm right grateful to these folks for showin' you up to be the rattler you are."

Lomarts looked from one to the other, his face twisted with the rage of desperation. He started to charge at Fred Soames to clear a way to escape by the front door. Soames just stood aside as he charged and smacked his gun barrel hard down on the side of Lomarts' head.

He said gruffly, "I'll see you folks later. There'll be a re-trial on the murder of Sheriff Coutts." He swung Lomarts on to his shoulders with remarkable ease, and walked, a little unsteadily, towards the door.

Della came out slowly, her face a study of conflict.

Chad stood staring at her, hardly daring to say a word. Then he began to walk toward her. Old John called out, "Better go right on in, son, and leave us old folks outside."

Della held the door open for him. She was studying his eyes now, trying to read the depths in them that she had so misunderstood before. She read the sincerity in them as she had noticed it in his voice before, albeit against her will at that time. She saw him now freed of the taint of outlawry, and she understood that you must know a man before you judge him in haste, that Chad Browning had fought against adversity and won, and she was filled with wonder and delight at the knowledge that he had done so because of his love for her. If she had doubted that he still loved her, all her doubts would have been dispelled now at the expression of feeling in his eyes, and the soft, tender lines of his face.

He turned to face her when he reached the inside of the bedroom. She closed the door and stood with her back to it.

He murmured, "I wonder what you think now..."

But he didn't have to ask the question. He stepped up close to her and as he kissed her, she saw all she needed to know in the tenderness and passion that filled his eyes.

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Special Feature

SIGNALS IN THE WILDERNESS

by Wade Hamilton

THE YOUNG Cheyenne Maiden was fleshing a buffalo-robe in front of her father's lodge. Suddenly a dazzling reflection swept across her face and momentarily blinded her. She got hurriedly to her feet and went into the lodge. "Mother, do you need water from the creek?"

"No. I have water."

She glanced at the pile of wood. "You need wood," she said, "and I will go to the creek and get you some."

Her mother studied her. Usually the daughter wanted to do as little as possible, but here she had to her own accord checked on the supply of water and wood. "You go and get wood, daughter."

The Cheyennes had pitched their camp about a quarter-mile from the creek on a level area. When the girl entered the brush, and was hidden from the lodges, a young buck stepped out and embraced her.

"I knew my looking glass would bring you," he said happily. "I was up on the hill and I flashed it across your face the first time. I am getting good with my looking glass."

"You have had lots of practice. But I haven't much time—I told my mother I was going to gather wood—and my father doesn't like you."

"How well do I know that," the young brave sighed.

For years trappers had been trading ooforaws—trinkets, beads and looking glasses—to the redskins. At first the trappers thought the Indians preferred looking-glasses because they liked to admire themselves, and because the mystery of the mirror intrigued them. Later on they found there were other reasons.

The wily redskin soon learned he could use the reflection of a mirror for many purposes, chief among these being communication. Because he ranged over a wild wilderness area, the Indian need some form of communication. At first he did this chore by the use of signal fires. With the com-

ing of the mirror, he communicated by reflection.

Scouts used mirror when out scouting for either game or the men with the white skin. Whenever the scout found a herd of buffalo, he would get on a high butte and flash his mirror. If the herd consisted on only a few buffalo, he would flash only once or twice but if it were a large herd he would flash many times. The more the flashes, the bigger the herd.

He also used the same procedure when seeing a troup of cavalry. If the troop was small, only a few white scouts, there would be only one or two flashes; if there were a lot of soldiers, there would be many flashes. He would also indicate the procedure of attack to be used against the white men — whether his war-party should advance from the right, the middle or the left.

THIS METHOD was used to convey messages over large distances, especially in the rough country where there were high buttes. A brave with a mirror would be located on a high butte and, when he saw something of danger, he would flash a signal to another butte; the Indian there would in turn relay it to another scout, also located on top of a high peak.

The army soon got wise to this means of communication and adopted it themselves, and many a message through code was flashed from one army post to another by the use of glistening mirrors.

When the buffalo at last had been killed off, the redskins were forced onto reservations, and cattle moved in where once buffalo had grazed. The Indian, of course, hated his confinement, even though many reservations were much greater in square miles than many eastern states. Some of them would "jump" their reservations. To exist they had to have beef. Their logic was simple and to the point; a steer or cow was merely a small buffalo with different types of horns.

Cattlemen lost many cattle to the redskins. Scouts would locate the cowpunchers and their locations would be revealed through the mirror-code. Then the marauders would butcher a beef in the area where there were no cowpunchers riding range.

Because of the wide expanse of the cattle-range, it was impossible for the cowman to have riders all over his range—therefore he lost many a fat beef to a Sioux or Cheyenne butcher-knife.

Mirrors would then call the other Indians in for a feast of free beef. A guard would be posted on a high vantage point to watch for the cowman and his riders. If they got too close, the mirror would flash its warning. When the cowmen swooped down he'd find no redskins.

Each tribe—even each war party—seemed to have no set code with which to send messages. Possibly this was brought about so other warring-parties of redskins could not understand one particular code. Some authorities state that a definite code-system was arranged the warriors before each separate raid.

But code or no code, it was rough on the cattlemen. For, as one grizzled cowman said, "To keep them redskins from stealin' my steers, I'd have to hire a cowboy for each cow."

And he added, "There ain't that many cowboys in Montana."

★

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GOLDEN NEMESIS

Complete Novelet

by D. L. Hyde

A pair of matched guns held the key to a fabulous treasure — and death!

AS MATT BYRNE came out of the El Dorado Hotel, that midnight, he could feel the pulsing, feverish excitement of this gold-mad shacktown that had swelled and burst at the seams and become a brawling, sprawling city of nearly fifteen thousand people.

He stood there for a moment, getting his bearings, letting the jostling street crowds swirl around him. He had once been a big, powerfully-built man, this Matt Byrne, but the malaria he'd contracted while crossing the Isthmus, had thinned him down to a wolf-like gauntness. It had hollowed his cheeks and dulled his eyes to flat gray. His hard-hewn, craggy features had always held a tough and raffish look, but the long death-fight with the fever and the hellish trip up the Pacific coast in the packed hold of a ship, had increased it a thousand-fold.

In the crowd that swept around Byrne, a couple of bearded, burly prospectors, fresh in from the gold fields, bleary-eyed drunk and hunting trouble, tried to shoulder him out of the way. Byrne set his legs apart and held his g r o u n d. Both men stopped, hunched their shoulders and balled their fists at their sides, started to cuss him out. But slowly, the oaths stopped tumbling from their loose lips as they saw the cast of Byrne's jaw, the flat, steel-gray coldness of his stare. They took in the hugeness of his bony frame, obvious even under the loose-hanging corduroy jacket and whipcord breeches tucked into the tops of black boots. One of the prospectors grabbed the elbow of the other and, mumbling some inarticulate apology, steered around Byrne and melted into the crowd as it moved on.

Byrne took a deep breath, hitched at the gunbelt with the empty holsters hanging from it, that was draped around his lean hips and pushed down-street into the crowd.

Slowly, the feverish excitement of the city began to blend with the strange inner excitement that had been mounting inside Matt Byrne, from the moment he'd checked into the hotel, and boiled to a head. He quickened his long stride and in a few moments he was stepping up onto the stoop of a great, barn-like building

Diane maintained fire, while Matt Byrne made his way around the rocks.

with a sign over the front that said in man-high letters: *EMPRESS PALACE.* He swung on one side for a moment as the batwings suddenly flung open and two gorilla-shouldered bouncers gave the grand heave-ho to a cursing, drunken bullwhacker.

The bouncers brushed off their hands and gave Byrne a suspicious once-over with their cold, hard eyes. Byrne held their gaze, evenly and pushed between them into the saloon. A great burst of sound struck his ears a cacophony of noises, roaring laughter, the giggling and squealing hostesses and percentage girls, the clicking of poker chips and the clinking of hundreds of glasses, the off-key tiny tempo of a jig-time piano tune, men's voices raised in drunken song.

BYRNE'S EYES swept a quick appraising glance through the dense fog of smoke that hung under the flickering light of a bent and twisted second-hand crystal chandelier. From the time he was a kid, Matt Byrne had been raised and brought up and worked in combination gaming casinos and saloons like this. He'd seen them up and down the East coast, in river-front towns along the Mississippi and The Big Muddy. But he'd never seen anything quite like this.

The *Empress* was the center, the rotten core and heart of the gold fields, even though the nearest panning and sluicing and digging took place miles away. It was here that the dust and nuggets came first to be doubled or trebled—or lost. Byrne could almost feel the thump and throb of the gold rush fever in this place. The lid had burst right off, at the *Empress.* The lust for money and more money was wide open and

raw and exposed; there were no pretences.

Byrne saw men at the green-topped poker tables, at the roulette and monte and faro layouts, jam-packed together, fighting each other for the chance to risk the poke of yellow dust that they'd sweated and slaved—and sometimes killed—to acquire. He saw the girls who worked for the Empress, yanking hair and clawing with carmined nails at each other, to sell their favors for a spilling of the dusty yellow wealth from some newly duded-up miner fresh in from his diggings. And then in turn, rush to one of the gaming layouts, to either lose or add to their newly acquired stake. Fortunes large and small, constantly changed hands within a few hours.

And as Byrne's flat, gray gaze moved around, it found the balcony that ran along the side and back of the *Empress*, place. It found the great fat, female Buddha of a woman who was at the vortex of this sucking whirlpool of gold, into whose safe, it all eventually found its way.

She was standing on the balcony, leaning over the rail, looking down on the gold-crazed confusion below. The Empress was taller and heavier than most men. She wore a silver-sequined evening gown, her massive, meaty arms and shoulders powdered a sickly white. About the layers of fat where her several chins joined her fleshy throat, diamond chokers winked in the dull light. Her hair, dyed a blinding orange-red, was piled high in a stylish pompadour, crowned with an emerald-studded tiara. From each plump, pale finger, a different jewel flashed its own glitter and she held a long, solid gold cigarette holder to brightly painted kewpie-doll lips and sucked in smoke and let it trail out again through her thick, flat nostrils. The Empress' eyes were like little pinpoints of icy blue light flashing out from the suety pouches of flesh above and below them. The highly-arched, thin black lines of her penciled brows gave her whole fat, evil face an incongruous look of pseudo surprise and innocence.

Those eyes constantly watched the action on the main floor of the saloon and gaming casino, below. They saw, now, a huge, redbearded seaman off a slave ship, grappling with one of the Empress' girls, in a booth almost below the proprietress. He had his hands around the girl's throat and was throttling her.

Lazily, the Empress reached to a table next to her and picked up a heavy silver urn full of flowers. She lifted it over the railing and dropped it, flowers and all, down upon the head of the obstreperous seaman below. The girl backed off, as the seaman fell unconscious to the floor, clutching her thin throat and looking up at the Empress; then she scuttled off toward a curtained doorway in the rear.

IT WAS RIGHT after this that Matt Byrne saw the Empress' roving glance catch him, standing near the doorway, pass on and stop and come shifting quickly back and stay there. Swiftly, before her glance could pass on, Byrne reached down to his empty twin holsters, unhooked the gunbelt and slipped it off his waist. He stood there, holding the belt and empty holsters in his hand, looking up from under his brows at the fat woman on the balcony. He felt sweat break out along the small of his back and under his arms and trickle coldly along his ribs. He felt the pulses in his wrists and temples throbbing and for a moment, it seemed his heart stopped. This was the moment he'd been waiting for so long. This could mean nothing, or everything, as the result of a trek of thousand of miles. This was the sign he was making, which would bring about either the final fulfillment or failure of his desperate mission. If the Empress didn't pick up his sign, if she turned away...

She turned away. She spun surprisingly quickly for a woman of her bulk, on her high heels, without another look down, away from the balcony.

Byrne felt his big bony fever-ravaged slacken and slump in despair. His heart started in again, but with a slow measured beat of dejection. The sweat began to go cool and clammy under his shirt and a slight shivering that wasn't entirely from the remains of the malaria still within him, took him.

"Oh, Lord!" he mumbled half aloud. "It's no good. It was all just a story. A sick, dying man's mad raving. It didn't mean a thing. I've come all this way, gone through all the hell for nothing. Now I'll never find the Golden Guns of Lucifer!"

He swung the gunbelt and empty holsters back around his lean waist and under the tails of his jacket and pushed through the mob toward the hands of perfume-reeking hostesses. He made it to the bar and pushed his way in. He downed three straight shots of rot-gut that seemed to burn a hole right through his belly. And then he straightened himself up, shaking himself a little, like a great shaggy wolf that's been wounded and beaten but not downed.

He was on his way from the bar, back out through the crowds toward the batwings, when a pair of slim hands that wouldn't be shaken off, touched his sleeves. A voice that was not whining and suggestive and wheedling crept into his ears. It was not begging him to buy a drink or a turn at the wheels of chance for its owner. It was saying simply; "Listen to me mister! I keep telling you—The Empress wants to see you. Her word is law, here. You refuse and you'll never get out of those batwings alive."

He stopped and as her words sunk in the excitement came beating like a bat's wings, back into his brain again. He turned to the girl who had approached him with the message. With a little surprise, he saw that she was not dressed in a sketchy, flashy gown like the other girls in the lace. She wore a simple black crushed linen suit. She wore no makeup, nor needed none. The fresh brightness of her black eyes cheeks and the mouth, red and sweet as a dew-kissed rose, were enough. Her hair was a shiny chestnut color, pulled back flat and tight from a white, straight center part.

From behind her small, perfectly formed ears, her hair tumbled about her shoulders in thick, soft coils.

"I'm a stranger here," Matt Byrne told the girl. "Reckon there must be some mistake. Nobody here would want any business with me."

The girl pursed her lips impatiently, her black eyes trying not to waver before the direct, admiring look in his. "Please don't argue. Come with me. The Empress doesn't like to be kept waiting. Come, Matt Byrne!"

His shaggy eyebrows raised. "You know my name?"

"Of course. She's been waiting for you, nearly a year. Every night she stands for hours on the balcony, waiting for you. Come."

HE PERMITTED her small. capable looking hands to tug his sleeve, to lead him through the crowd, toward the rear of the saloon. "Who are *you?*"

"Diane Adams I—I work for the Empress."

Bryne gestured to a painted-up blonde girl, with her head thrown back, laughing, as she struggled between two husky, cursing mule-skinners, each trying to maul her way from the other. "So does she" Bryne said, with a wry grin.

He saw Diane Adams stiffen and raise her chin, haughtily. Her eyes flashed the fire of temper at him. "I ought to slap you for that," she said. "I'm the Empress' private secretary. I take care of her accounts."

Bryne didn't have a chance to speak

again as they came to a stairwell and Diane lifted her skirts above slender ankles and flew up the steps ahead of him. At the top, she turned down a dimly lit corridor, walking primly on hurried short steps, in front of him, not turning back nor giving him another chance to converse with her. She came to a door at the far end of the hallway and stood to one side. "Please enter," she said.

-2-

MATT BYRNE stepped past Diane Adams, and into a room that was crowded with a hugh, rolltopped desk, a mammoth safe and the tremendous bulk of the Empress, herself. She was sitting at the desk, a great expanse of her fat, powdered white back showing the thin straps of the evening gown cutting into the flesh of her shoulders, the emerald tiara glittering in the light from an oil lamp on the desk.

"Sit down, Matt Byrne, and make yourself t'home," a rumbling, almost masculine voice bade him. "You're a little late."

He heard the door of the office slam behind him and moved toward a rickety looking straight chair against the wall opposite the safe. He jacknifed his long, rangy body down onto the chair, his fingers clenching and unclenching on his lap.

"Yeah," he said. "I was delayed a mite. I had some trouble."

"Oh? Where is Humphrey Pomm?"

"Six feet under the rotting muck of the Panamanian jungles. He—before he kicked the traces—Humphrey said to give you his love."

The big woman, still bent over her desk, without turning to face her caller, swore in a low rumble, running the words all together, professionally. "The dirty little bow-legged stinker!" she finished up. She turned then and quickly, trying to keep Bryne from seeing it, dashed moisture away from her fat buried eyes with one jeweled hand.

They sat there, for a moment, then, staring at each other, sizing each other up and Bryne couldn't help marveling to himself at this whole fantastic deal. He kept remembering gnarled and bow-legged little Humphrey Pomm, his wizened little face yellowed and wasted with the final ravages of the fever, lying there, on a cot in a stinking tropical hut, his eyes burning up at Bryne as he whispered:

"You won't believe it, mister, when you see the Empress. You won't believe that a mountain of a woman like her could ever have anything to do with a dried up little shrimp like m'self."

Humphrey had been right. It was hard to believe that they had been man and wife. The Empress could have picked up the little prospector with one fat pinky and slung him over the moon.

"How come the little sluice-rat picked on you?" The Empress demanded suddenly. "Where did you meet him? How did you get to know him?"

Byrne took a deep breath. "It's a long story," he told her. "I'll try to cover up in a hurry. You know how it is on the Isthmus, with all the riff-raff from the Atlantic side crowding across to board a ship to come up here and all the newly rich and beaten or fagged-out, from the Pacific side, pushing their way back to the Atlantic to come home. The mad trading of mining equipment. There was almost as much dinero to be made there, as here. I'm a gambler, ma'am, by trade. I was on my way here, when I saw that it wasn't necessary to go any farther than the Isthmus to get my share of the gold."

The big woman chuckled and nodded her head until the wattle of fat around her neck jigged. "Go on, go on!" she urged.

"I worked in a place called *Lazy Lou's,*" Byrne continued. "It was only a hole in the wall, compared to what you have here. But the pickin's were good for a man with a deck of cards and a set of fast fingers and sharp eyes. Don't get me wrong, ma'am; I'm no sharper. I win honestly, or I don't win at all... Anyhow, one night I spotted a bowlegged little weather-beaten oldster getting taken over in a game of red dog by a group of sharpers. I felt sorry for the little old codger and the way they were cheatin' hell out o' him, was brutal. I reckon I was a fool, but I had to stick my nose into the game. I saved Humphrey Pomm's money for him and later, when the gunplay started, his life. In the excitement, he disappeared and I didn't see him again for several months. I'd practically forgotten about him.

"Then I got a message to go out to a jungle village and I found Humphrey there, dyin' of malaria."

HE WATCHED the Empress knuckle her eyes again, her full, painted lips tight against her teeth. He went on: "Humphrey was grateful to me for what I had done for him, that night in *Lazy Lou's,* so he told me the yarn of Lucifer's golden guns. It sounded pretty fantastic and right up until I got your message downstairs, I'd figured myself to be on a fool's errand. But when you spotted me, sent for me, I began to feel that there was something to the story. Where are the guns?"

The Empress chuckled a little. She fitted a long white, Russian cigaret into her gold holder, inhaled deeply and blew out a rolling cloud of blue smoke. Talking through it, she said:

"There's a chance you're not the right man, not the real Byrne that Humphrey sent me the message about. Other men could answer your description, could have learned of part of the story, somewhere and come in here tonight, like you did, with empty holsters, hoping to pry the whole story out of me. You tell me the yarn as Humphrey told it to you, Bryne. If it's complete, then I'll know you're the right hombre and I won't be givin' anything away, nor makin' any mistake."

So he did that. Swiftly, he repeated the wild yarn old Humphrey Pomm had related to him. It had begun shortly after the first discovery of gold at Captain Sutter's mill. Humphrey Pomm had been out here, prospecting before that and was one of the first to make a big strike, along with his pardner, a man who because of the devil-like cast to his long thin features, had been nicknamed Lucifer Hawks.

After the first excitement had worn off, the two lucky prospectors had worked their diggings at the end of an isolated canyon, to the limit. The biggest part of the newly acquired wealth, they had then buried where nobody else could ever possibly find it. With the rest, they were going to 'Frisco, to have a good time. The idea was to make sure that they didn't lose, or throw away the whole of their fortune. To make certain that neither partner doublecrossed the other one, and that nobody else would be able to find the buried treasure, Humphrey Pomm and Lucifer Hawks cooked up the following plan.

In New Orleans, Lucifer Hawks had once purchased a pair of hand-tooled sixguns, with gold-plated grips. They were his pride and joy. It was he who had decided that these guns would hold the secret of the buried gold. So the two prospectors had drawn up a map, torn it in half and hidden each half in one of the guns. The map was so drawn up, that neither part was any good without the other. Then Lucifer Hawks had given one of the guns to Humphrey Pomm.

. A few days later, in 'Frisco, Lucifer Hawks had disappeared; Humphrey waited for him to come back so they could return for the gold, but he never saw Lucifer again. Meanwhile, Humphrey had settled in the city and married the woman who called herself the Empress, who ran a saloon and gambling house which was to grow and prosper through the gold boom until it was the biggest place in town. He gave his golden gun to the Empress to put into her safe. A few months later, he'd heard news that Lucifer was in New York and had set out down to cross the Isthmus to go after him. Then he had been taken sick with the fever, during which time he'd gotten another message from the Empress, this time, that Lucifer Hawks had come back to 'Frisco. He'd been wounded fatally in a gun-battle, but had gotten to the Empress before he died and given her the other golden gun to put in her safe.

When Humphrey Pomm heard this, realizing that he, himself, was not going to live to get back to 'Frisco, he had summoned Matt Byrne, one man he figured he could trust and told him the story. At the same time, he sent a message to The Empress, telling her that he was sending Byrne, who knew the whole story, to help her. She needed a man to help her go after the buried gold, but Humphrey didn't wnat her to trust any of the gold-mad miners who hung out at the saloon, he wanted Bryne to help her. And for his trouble, Byrne was to get Lucifer Hawk's half of the buried bonanza.

WHEN MATT BYRNE finished, the Empress nodded. "That sounds like the straight of it, and I can understand how it would sound to you like the mouthings of a madman. But there's one more thing.

"Only one man out here ever knew my real name, and that was Humphrey Pomm. And he only told one person—Matt Byrne. He never called me anything but 'The Empress', even in private, so if you're Matt Byrne, then you know my name."

She picked up a pencil and a slip of paper, and handed it to him. "Write my name on that, and give it to me."

Byrne grinned, then printed *Tatiana Oblonskovna* on the paper and handed it to the woman. The Empress glanced at it, nodded, then struck a match and touched it to the slip of paper. When it was consumed, she said, "I'll get those guns of Lucifer Hawks now, and you'll see that Humphrey's story was true."

Byrne said, "If so, it was worth catching the malaria myself and goin' through everything I have to get here. I'd go through hell it's own self, I reckon, for $50,000 worth of gold nuggets."

He watched the fat woman waddle over to the safe and squat down in front of it. He listened to the falling of tumblers sounding faintly in the quiet of the little office, as she spun the combination. Finally, there was the squeaking of the heavy door of the safe as it swung open. When she stood up and turned around, the Empress had a set of twin six-shooters by their long barrels, their golden butt-grips glistening in the dull lamp glow. She walked over to Matt Byrne and handed them to him.

"The sections of map are hidden under the grips."

Byrne took the guns, went over to the desk, under the lamp and with his jacknife, quickly pried off the gold-plated grips. He stared down at them for a long time, then straightened up, frowning, the muscled ridge of his jaws, tight.

Through his teeth, he said: "There is *nothing* under these gun grips—nothing at all!"

"What!" the giant saloon proprietress hurled herself across the office, fumbled at the guns with her fat fingers. "Gone!" she kept saying. "They were *there!* I saw them. Now they're gone. Somebody got to the guns and

stole the pieces of map. They've stolen our treasure, Byrne!"

She reached out and gripped his arms with her fat, jeweled fingers and the grip was almost as strong as a man's. She shook him. "You stupid string-bean, you must've talked! You must have mentioned Humphrey's story to somebody and they beat you here, broke in here and somehow opened the safe and—"

"Cut it!" he stopped her. "That safe shows no signs of being forced open. Somebody used the combination. Who knows it, beside yourself?"

She shook her head, standing there, dazed looking. "No one," she said, dully. "No one knows it. I don't see how—" She broke off, the fat of her hooded eyes almost closing completely over them. "Unless it's Diane Adams. She's been in here when I've opened the safe. She could have watched or listened to the combination. It has to be her; it couldn't be anybody else."

ALMOST before the Empress finished speaking, Byrne leaped toward the door, caught the knob in his big hand and swung it open. Diane Adams stood there, her darkly pretty face looking pale and frightened, but determined. She held a derringer in her right hand, levelly.

"That's right Empress. It *was* I who took the sections of map from the golden guns of Lucifer. And I'll tell you why. Because you lied in your teeth about Lucifer Hawks dying. You had him killed. Right here, looking for Humphrey Pomm, so that they could go back together to get their treasure in gold nuggets. And you thought it would be a good idea to have the whole thing. You—"

"The girl's gone loco!" the Empress interrupted. "Don't believe her, Byrne... Diane, how can you even say such a thing. You weren't even working for me when Lucifer Hawks came back here."

"I know that," Diane admitted. "I came here to find out what happened to Lucifer."

"Why?" Byrne asked. "What was he to you?"

"He was my father," she said, her breath catching a little in her throat. "All the time he was out here prospecting, he kept me in a school back East. When I didn't hear from him for months, I left the school and set out to look for him. I traced him as far as this saloon and then when I couldn't seem to get any farther, I applied for a job with you, Empress, under another name. Not long afterward, I happened to spot the golden guns in your safe and remembered my father showing them to me, once. One of the grips was loose where you'd pried it open before and I saw part of the map sticking out. So I took both parts. I waited my time, then, to learn what had happened to my father. Tonight, eavesdropping on your conversation with Matt Byrne, I heard the story you told. I realized it wasn't the truth and figured out what really happened."

"If you can prove that yarn, Diane," Byrne said. "If you really are the daughter of Lucifer Hawks, that means his share of the buried gold is yours. I reckon I'll have to just step out of the picture."

"I can prove it all right," she said. "I—"

The rest of the sentence was cut off, as Diane Hawks suddenly half turned toward a sound in the hallway behind her. She was a second too late. A husky, hairy arm went around her throat from behind. Another arm knocked the derringer from her hand. The man who had grabbed Diane from behind, now came into the angle of Byrne's vision, past the door jamb.

He was a squat, powerfully built, barrel-chested figure of a man, with

huge, bunched shoulders and a bull-neck. He had a leonine mane of shaggy blond hair and thick, yellow brows over his deeply sunken green eyes. His mouth was big and loose and moist looking. Most of the bones in his nose had been smashed so that it was twisted and spread half across his face. Over the top of Diane's dark head, as she struggled in vain to break free, the blond man showed a set of tobacco stained and crooked teeth.

"What's goin' on here, Empress? This little secretary o' yourn turnin' out to be a female bandit?"

"No!" the Empress forced a husky laugh. "It's all right, Jackson; just a little personal trouble between the two of us. Now she's disarmed, mebbe I can talk a little sense into her fool young head. Kick that derringer over here and then turn her loose."

Jackson did that and Diane Hawks stepped away from him, rubbing her throat, patting loose curls of her hair back into place. Jackson just stood there grinning, wolfishly, looking first at Byrne, then at the Empress, with a curiously sly grin on his heavy featured, stupid looking face.

He jerked his head at Byrne. "This son givin' yuh any trouble, Empress?"

She shook her jowels, impatiently. "No, no, Jackson. Everything's all right now. What was it you wanted?"

He told her that there had been a dispute at the bar over the price of drinks and one of the customers was demanding to see her.

"Tell him I'm too busy right now," the Empress said. "Settle the thing any way you want, Jackson. You bartenders are in complete control of the bar when I'm not around. Now beat it. And don't disturb me again." She bent suddenly and picked up the little derringer Jackson had kicked toward her. She pointed it at Diane Hawks. "You, honey, stay right here. We got some more palaverin' to do."

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SHE WAITED until Jackson slammed the door shut behind him, then said: "All right, Diane; you must have the parts of the map. Let's have them!" She waggled the derringer at Diane, menacingly.

Diane looked frightened and undecided. Her long-lashed black eyes glanced fleetingly at Byrne, as though for help or advice. Finally, he said: "Do as she says, kid. Like I told you, before, you give us proof of bein' this Lucifer Hawks' daughter and I'll see that you get your share."

With that, Diane Hawks turned her back to them, hiked up her skirt and fumbled about for a moment. When she straightened and turned around, she held two little slips of crumpled paper in her hand and a tiny gold locket. She walked over to the Empress' desk and set them both down near the lamp. "There are the two sections of the map," she said, "And proof that I'm Diane Hawks."

Still holding the derringer, the Empress wadded over and picked up the pieces of paper, glanced at them quickly and passed them over to Byrne. Looking at the small, stained and almost illegible scraps of paper, he saw that they showed a simply drawn map of a region called Red Rock Canyon. In small, cramped lettering, the instructions said:

"Two miles inside Red Rock Canyon find tepee rock. Stand on rock at ten forenoon and walk where shadow falls one hundred paces an start diggin'."

The locket that Byrne held showed a small picture of a long-faced man,

with slanting eyebrows and a sharply hooked nose and a widows peak over his forehead. On the back of the locket were inscribed the words: *To my daughter Diane, from her loving fa-John M. Hawks...*

Bryne said to Empress, "This seems to do it. The gal's claim seems legit. What happens now?"

The Empress tapped the long gold cigaret holder against her dumpling-fat cheeks for a moment, then said: "Tomorrow morning, we'll all set out for Red Rock Canyon and dig up the hidden gold. We'll pack it back into town on some extra burros and split the take three ways. Fair enough?"

Byrne looked at Diane, and she nodded imperceptibly. He shrugged. "Two wimmin against one poor man," he said, grinning. "I reckon it's settled no matter what I say."

They talked for awhile longer, making their plans for the morning and as they talked their excitement mounted. When Byrne finally left them to return to his hotel, he lay on his iron-runged bed, in the small room for long hours, unable to sleep. He kept thinking about all that had happened since that first night down on the Isthmus when he'd met Humphrey Pomm. He kept thinking about the girl, Diane Hawks and how if they pooled their shares of the gold together it would make a right nice sum enough for a couple to buy a fine spread somewhere. For the first time, he realized that he wasn't getting any younger and that the roaming life he'd been leading was beginning to pall. He wondered how it would be to settle down somewhere for good, with a girl like Diane. It was on the pleasant thought that Matt Byrne went to sleep.

THE NEXT morning he felt more refreshed and physically fit than he had since before he'd been struck down with the fever in Panama. He didn't know whether it was at the prospect of seeing Diane Hawks again, or because of the excitement of going after the hidden gold treasure of a couple of old prospectors who had struck it rich.

He shaved and dressed, left the hotel and purchased a brace of sixguns from the local gunsmith, to fill his empty holsters and met Diane and the Empress at the appointed time in front of the *Palace*. They were already waiting for him, mounted on pack mules, with an extra mount for him and two others to pack back the gold nuggets.

Even in the bright morning sun, Diane Hawks looked pretty, he noticed. Her dark eyes were fresh and clear looking. And even the simple lines of the blue workshirt and levis, she wore, couldn't hide the gently curved richness of her figure. The bright sunlight didn't do so well by the Empress. The older woman's red hair was tucked up under a large Stetson. Her huge, dumpy figure was tightly encased in corduroy jacket and trousers tucked into the tops of hobbled boots. Her face looked puffy and tired, the heavy dewlaps of unhealthy looking flesh around her jaws a pasty white. Without her makeup and jewels, without the bright background of her noisy saloon and gaming hall, in the light of day, the Empress was just a too fat, tired old woman, with the taint of dissipation and a suggestion of evil in her face.

As they rode out of town, Matt Byrne couldn't help remembering Diane's accusation that the Empress had murdered Lucifer Hawks in order to have his share of the treasure. If that was true, he couldn't trust the woman's agreement to share with both of them. A feeling of uneasiness beset him as they rode farther away from town and into the shadows of the distant mountains. This increased as the Empress became grim-faced and grouchy to a greater extent than the discomfort of the ride warranted.

But as they rode the burros into

the deep cut in the foothills known as Red Rock Canyon, Matt Byrne shelved his fears in the suspense of wondering whether they would find the buried treasure. He had lived with the fanciful tale he'd heard from old Humphrey Pomm so long, had wondered about its authenticity so many times that it had become like a dream. It was hard to believe that at last he was going to learn the final truth of it.

They reached the huge wigwam shaped hunk of stone, setting in the middle of the dried up river bed at the bottom of the canyon, that was known as Tepee Rock, a few minutes before ten o'clock. On the way out they'd passed many of the snake-roofed cabins and Long Tom sluices of miners; but here in Red Rock Canyon there was no sign of any of the thousands of men who had come to the area from all parts of the world to try their luck in prying some of Mother Earth's riches from her lap. Here there was nothing but the solemn quiet of the wilderness place, with a lone hawk swooping and circling in the bright blue of the morning sky over the canyon. It was, Byrne observed, an excellent spot that the two old grubstakers had picked to bury their treasure.

AT THE exact time mentioned on the map, Byrne climbed Tepee Rock. The Empress then paced off the distance and stood on the spot, while Byrne clambered down off the rock and with the help of Diane Hawks, drove the burros toward the Empress. For a moment, they all stood there, looking down at the rocky, grave-strewn ground beneath them, a little awed. There was no indication that a fortune in yellow gold nuggets was buried there beneath their feet.

Suddenly the Empress laughed, raspingly. She said: "This is the way to mine. You don't waste a lifetime looking. You don't break your back and sweat yourself to death diggin' and diggin' for nothin'. We *know* the gold is here. We dig for a little while and there it is."

Matt Byrne didn't say anything. He didn't remind the woman that what she said was true but only because her husband, who was now dead and his partner, Diane's father, had spent probably the best part of their life in that back-breaking, sweating job. He didn't remind the Empress of that because she wouldn't have paid any attention. She would have laughed at him. She had only one thought in her mind, now. There was the crazy, familiar glitter in her rheumy old eyes that he had come to recognize. The gold fever was upon her as burning hot as though she had actually been mining herself and was on the verge of a big strike.

Byrne unpacked the tools from one of the burros and went to work, using pick axe and shovel. He dug a hole almost three feet square and of equal depth before he finally stopped and leaned on the spade, sweat running into his eyes and coursing through the dirt and beard on his cheeks. He said through his teeth: "Something's wrong, somewhere. It isn't here."

So Byrne climbed up out of the hole he'd dug and started in a new place right next to it. This time, he'd dug down six inches, the pick made a ringing sound as it struck metal. He went to work with a fury, then ignoring the aching of his back muscles and biceps. In a few minutes, he had bared the top of a huge metal box. By now, both women were standing at the edge of the pit and were egging him on. When he had gotten the first metal box completely unearthed, they helped him lift it out of the hole. With the pick point, he pried off the lid. It was filled with gold nuggets.

While the woman loaded the contents of the first box into the burro packs, Matt Byrne dug up two more. It was an hour later before all the

nuggets were stowed away inside the mule packs. Byrne, now that the excitement was beginning to wear off, felt weary and beat-out. He stood swaying for a moment, in the hot sun, the hard labor that he had put in, the past couple of hours beginning to take its toll on his fever-weakened body. But he managed a grin as he said:

"Mebbe Humphrey Pomm and Lucifer Hawks can rest in their graves, now. Lucifer's golden guns have done their jobs. The treasure is found. Let's strike back for town."

He started toward the spot near the Empress, where he had stripped off his cartridges belt and gun-filled holsters. He saw the Empress suddenly bend and pick them up and held out his hand as he walked toward her, figuring that she was going to hand them to him. But then he stopped short, realizing that he had figured wrong. The Empress wasn't handing his gun gear to him. She was pulling the brace of six guns from their leather. She dropped the cartridge belt. She held the guns toward him, all right, but it was a barrel first.

She said, her full lips curving at one corner in a sneer: "Stand, Byrne! You ain't goin' back to town. This is the end o' the trail for you, mister!"

Diane Hawks cried: "What's going on? What's the idea, Empress?"

THE EMPRESS swung one of the sixguns toward her, covering her. "You, too, dearie," she said. Her pale, flabby face, beaded with sweat, now, formed a mask of a grin. "You two didn't really think I was goin' to split this haul o' gold nuggets with you, did you?"

"So you're givin' us a double deal?" Byrne said.

"Not exactly. You forget, handsome, that my dear, departed husband was the one who made this strike. I only needed your help to get it up out o' the ground."

"You're forgetting a man named Lucifer Hawks, Humphrey's partner," Matt Byrne reminded her. "Cut me out of it, if you will, ma'am, but give the kid, here, a break." He jerked his head at Diane.

The Empress laughed, her flabby, drooping jowels dancing merrily. "Such sentiment!" she snorted. "Humphrey picked the right man all right. An honest, sentimental fool. Well, in a moment, you'll see what honesty and sentiment get a person. When you're lyin' here, rottin' and the buzzard are swoopin' down to peck out your eyeballs!"

Byrne felt the hackles along the nape of his neck begin to rise. This woman who had gotten the drop on him didn't have a scruple in her gross body. There was now no doubt in his mind but what she really meant to kill him and Diane both; he half made a move toward rushing her, but brought himself up short as the guns stiffened in her at fists, her plump white forefinger tightening on the triggers.

In desperation, he asked, "Don't you have enough dinero, Empress? You must make a fortune out of that place you run. What good is it goin' to do you to commit double murder just for a few more thousand dollars."

She grinned at him. "I never get enough money, Byrne," she told him. "I reckon it gets to be like a sickness after a while. You get so you want more and more... And it isn't goin' to be double murder—it'll be triple. The kid was right. I did do in her old man, Lucifer Hawks. He, too, was a trusting stupid fool."

A little cry came from Diane, then. Looking toward her, Byrne saw that her cheeks were stained with the red of rage. Her tiny fists were clenched at her sides. She started a blind rush at the older woman, screaming: "You fat, lying murderous old witch, I never had any real proof that you killed my father, but now that I know for certain, I'm going to get you for it. I swore that I would. I—"

Matt Byrne cut her off. He yelled: "Wait, Diane! Don't be loco! She'll gun you down. You haven't a chance that way. We might yet be able to reason with her!"

But Diane Hawks' anger and frustration were too great. She paid no heed to Byrne's warning but kept on with her headlong rush toward the Empress. Cursing, Byrne started a desperate, last minute leap as he saw the Empress' trigger finger on the gun pointing at Diane began to squeeze.

A second later there was the flat clap-sound of a gunshot echoing back and forth between the walls of the canyon and Byrne stopped his leap to save Diane from the Empress' guns. He saw Diane stop, too. He waited to watch her fall, but she didn't; she kept standing there, staring in surprise at the Empress. And then Byrne noticed a curious thing. No smoke was trickling from the muzzle of the gun that the Empress held.

The next instant, he noticed that the woman was no longer looking at either of them. She was staring into space between them. And then both sixguns held in her fists began to droop, barrel down. When they had dropped back down to her sides, her fat fingers slowly opened and the weapons clattered to the ground.

Then the Empress started walking toward them. She took three steps and her legs went out from under her. She murmured: "I—I been double-crossed. We're bein' drygulched. We—" The words stopped as a sudden froth of blood appeared on her full lips. Her eyes rolled wildly back into her head and she pitched headlong to the ground. Matt Byrne saw the tiny black bullethole in the back of her corduroy jacket at the same time that another rifle shot echoed from back up the canyon. This time, the bullet went screaming over their heads, hit a jut rock and ricocheted off in another direction, whining its deadly song.

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BYRNE THREW himself at Diane and pulled her down to the ground with him. He crawled swiftly toward the fallen figure of the Empress and scooped up his own sixguns from where she had dropped them. Next, he crawled over to his cartridge belt and got that. Meanwhile, his eyes had been searching along the top of the canyon walls and he saw a flash of flame and a puff of smoke from a clump of sugar pines on the rimrock. A moment later, a few hundred yards father on, another rifle shot burst forth. As he crawled back, hugging flat to the rock strewn earth, there were two more shots, from different spots along the edge of the cliffs.

He took Diane by the hand and the two of them squirmed along the ground until they reached the temporary shelter of a clump of rocks. Settled there, Byrne watched the places where the first shots had come from and when he saw a sudden movement, he raised up on both elbows and blazed away with one gun, emptying it. He saw a man stop short on the edge of an abuttment, flying his arms into the air and slowly tumble over the edge, his body arcing out into space, the ringing sound of his scream of anguish, a soul-chilling thing, as it echoed up and down the hollow canyon.

For a moment after that, there was nothing but silence. "Who is it?" Diane wondered, tremulously, reloading the empty sixgun Byrne handed to her. "Somebody must have followed us, are after the gold."

"Reckon so," Matt Byrne agreed dryly. "And I got an idea it's that

hulking blond barkeep of the Empress', the man who butted into our conference, yesterday, the man she called Jackson. He must've overheard part of the conversation, learned what we were up to, and followed us out here, with a couple o' his cronies, this mornin'."

"That must be it," Diane said. "Nobody else could know. And we left town this morning before anybody else was up, hardly."

As if in answer to their wondering, a deep voice suddenly rang out. It said: "Yuh might as well th'ow out your irons and come out into the open with your hands raised. We still outnumber yuh, three tuh two!"

"It's Jackson, all right!" Diane told Byrne. "I recognize his voice. And that must be Sid Logan, Cal McMasters and Wick Rogers, with him. Those four have always hung out together. Jackson is a bartender at the *Palace,* and the other three work there as bouncers. They're a tough crew, Matt. Maybe we'd better do as they say."

"We wouldn't stand a chance," he growled back. "They'd gun us down, pronto. No, kid, our only chance is to fight 'em off—or die tryin'."

With that, he raised one of his guns and pumped two shots in the direction of the voice. There was a muffled oath from one of the hiding spots on the cliff and then two more rifle shots whipped down at them. A slug whipped up gravel next to Byrne's face, where he was sprawled on the ground. He felt Diane hug up closer to him.

FOR SEVERAL minutes, then, there were no more shots. Byrne, watching the place on the canyon cliffs from where they were being ambushed, saw a stooped figure scurry out from behind a rock. He snapped a quick shot but saw the bent figure keep going and knew that he had missed. He kept watching and saw that same shadowy figure emerge in the clear for a flashing moment again, but not long enough for him to get in a shot.

"We're liable to be in real hot water, soon, honey," he whispered to Diane. "One of them made a break. The way he's moving, it looks as though he's aimin' to get behind us. We'll be caught in a crossfire, then. We'll have protection on only one side. I think I got another one of them before. If so, that leaves only two against two. But we're still at a disadvantage, because they're up high and with more cover. We're stuck down here where they can pot at us from any angle."

"Isn't there something I can do to help, Matt?" she begged.

He turned around and looked at her. Her face was very close to his and he saw no fear in her dark eyes. Serious concern, yes, but none of the panic and terror that some women would show in similar circumstances. Her little jaw was as set and determined as his own. She looked like the most beautiful thing in the world to Matt Byrne at that moment.

"Diane," he said. "This is goin' to sound loco as all hell t'you. I dunno whether everything that's happened has made me blow all my buttons or whether it's the fever comin' back on me. Anyhow, everytime I look at you I get weak and dizzy. I reckon I'm just plumb off my rocker over you, Diane. I want to tell you right now, in case we never get out of this tight. You understand, Diane?"

She nodded. The ghost of a smile played about her young lips. Her eyes moved over his face like a caress. "I understand, Matt," she said, levelly. Her hand caught his wrist and squeezed it tightly.

To cover up the sudden surge of emotion that ran through him, Byrne said, now. "We've got to outfox these piratin' coyotes up there on the rimrock. We can't let them get us between

a crossfire. There's only one thing to do."

He handed one of the sixguns to Diane along with a few extra cartridges. "The way we're set up behind this rock, that hombre up yonder, in front of us, can't see us, if we stay in a line with this rock. You're goin' to set here and keep pottin' away at him. I'm goin' to move back, keepin' in line with this rock and meet that skunk who's tryin' to get into position behind us, half way. It's our only chance."

"All right, Matt," she breathed. Her hand squeezed his arm again. "Be careful. Please, Matt."

"Sure. Sure I will," he told her. He bent his head and let his lips brush hers in a quick, impetuous kiss and then he started to edge off backward, away from her, always crouched, and keeping the rock in line of vision between himself and the owl-hoot up front.

IT TOOK him a long time, and every once in awhile, he heard a rifle slug go whistling down the canyon toward the rock where Diane was. For an instant his heart would stop cold, fearing that she had been hit. But then he would hear the answering shot of his own sixgun and knew that she was still all right. He would move on.

At length, he reached another cluster of rocks, near the base of the canyon wall. Once behind this, he was able to stand erect, without being seen and make a wild dash into a deep crevice. There were foot and handholds up the side of the crevice that helped him to climb swiftly and surely. He kept going until he felt that he was at a point where he was above the man trying to sneak up on their rear. He waited a moment, getting his breath and his bearings.

And then he spotted the other man, off to his left and below him about a hundred feet. The man was setting himself up, bracing himself on a narrow shelf of rock, in a perfect position to gun down on Diane, far below, lying prone behind her rock protection.

Matt Byrne started toward him, slowly, carefully, so as not to dislodge any loose shale. But every second was feverish with excitement and fear for him, for he saw this man, a tall shaggy haired string bean of a man in a mackinaw coat, resting his rifle on a jut of rock and taking careful aim at Diane in the valley below.

He would only need one shot, Byrne knew; he wouldn't miss. Finally Byrne made a ledge about ten feet above the tall man and just as the other was sighting along the long barrel of the rifle Byrne leapt. He hurtled down and landed full on the back of the outlaw. The other's rifle went skittering off the edge of the cliff into space, clanged to the bottom, several hundred feet below and went off, with a sharp crack of sound.

The man screamed as Byrne landed, but Matt clung tight with both knees, belabored the other man's neck and the back of his head with his fists. For a few moments, they wrestled back and forth perilously close to the edge of that tiny shelf of rock, first one on top, then the other. After a few moments, both squirmed free from the other and climbed to his feet. They faced each other there, with barely free inches between themselves and the sheer drop to the rocky floor of the canyon below.

The outlaw was wild-eyed and slobbering with fear and anger now. A steady stream of oaths poured from his curled lips as he swung a murderous blow at Byrne's head. Matt Byrne ducked at the last moment and the first riffled through his hair and hit against the rock behind Byrne. Then Matt feinted with his left, turning away the other man's guard. He brought his right fist up from his

boot tops. It had all the weight of his one and eighty rangy pounds behind it. It landed on the other man's lantern jaw with a sickening *thwack* sound.

The outlaw was raised clear off his feet. He sunfished backward and out into space. He was out cold from the punch and didn't utter a sound but Byrne could hear his body bouncing off juttings of rock, all the way down.

He stood there, getting his breath back, trembling for a moment. And then he heard a shot from the other point of ambush and quickly turned his eyes down to the place behind the rock where Diane was hiding. He saw her prone figure jerk and then, as he watched, she got up onto her hands and knees, one hand pressed to the side of her head. She half rose up to her feet and then fell headlong.

BYRNE STOOD there, horrified, a numbed feeling spreading through him, as he looked down at that still figure behind the rock, far below, its arms outspread, the sixgun no longer clutched in the small fingers.

And then he saw another thing. Jackson, who had shot Diane, had witnessed his hit. He had broken out into the open now, convinced, apparently, that Byrne had been taken care of by his partner, and knowing that he was safe from Diane. Byrne watched him scrambling down the side of the canyon wall. He realized that if Diane was only wounded, if she wasn't yet dead, Jackson would finish her off.

With a little cry, Byrne turned back the way he had come. He retrieved his sixgun from the place where it had fallen, in his mad ascent before. He jammed it into his belt and started a swift, crazy climb down the side of the cliff again. He reached the bottom about the same time that Jackson did. Both men started their mad sprint toward Diane almost simultaneously.

Halfway to their goal, both seemed to realize that the race was going to end in a dead heat. They both stopped at the same time, setting themselves, bracing their feet apart, whipping up their irons. They stood there, a hundred yards apart, with Diane prone figure between them, like two men in a formal duel, only there were no witnesses here, no formalities. There would be no medical attention for the one who lost.

Almost as one sound, both sixguns barked against the wild silence of the lonely canyon. Matt Byrne felt something tug at the shoulder of his jacket, felt a warm wetness running down his arm. But through the cordite-reeking gunsmoke, he stared, cold-eyed toward Jackson. He saw the short, powerfully built bar-keep, his thick mane of yellow hair gleaming in the sun, folding, slowly, both hands clutching at his middle.

Slowly, every muscle aching, almost dizzy with weariness, Byrne started again toward Diane. He stepped over the twisted still heap that was Jackson. He reached Diane, and knelt beside her, his heart thundering. He kept saying: "You can't die, honey. Not now. Not when everything's over and all right at last."

And then his heart went to leaping wildly inside the cave of his ribs, as he saw her head turn. Her long tangled black lashes flickered for an instant and then those dark eyes were looking up at him dazedly. He saw then, dabbing, with the sleeve of his jacket at the little streak of blood there, that the bullet had only grazed her temple. He said a little prayer of thanks and held her head in his arms for a moment.

He helped her to her feet a moment later and she stood there, dizzily, leaning against him. Then, slowly, quietly, they started to walk down

canyon toward the boogered burros, their arms around each other. The sun was warm upon them. High above them a crow whirled and cawed at them. And for the first time in as long as he could remember, Matt Byrne felt a strange, pleasant peaceful glow of happiness spreading within him.

He glanced up at the blue sky and softly said: "Well, Diane, it looks as though Lucifer's golden guns are going to bring happiness to someone, at last."

"Yes, Matt," she whispered back and held his arm very tightly and he knew that she knew what he had meant and that everything was going to be fine between them.

Special Feature

THE MAN WHO STRANGLED WOLVES

by Lew Smith

JACK ABERNATHY rode into the cow-camp with a live wolf draped over his shoulders. He had wired the savage beast's jaws shut with bailing-wire; now he tossed his growling canine burden to the ground and dismounted. The older hands gave a glance at the wolf and kept on eating chuck but a younger cowpuncher came over and looked at the wolf, wonder in his eyes.

"Did you trap that wolf, fella."

Abernathy smiled. "Do you see any trap marks on his legs, cowboy?"

The cowpuncher studied the captive closely. The wolf had his hind legs wired together. He tried to rise and fell down again. Jack Abernathy's wolfhounds loafed in the shade of the mess-wagon, tongues hanging out.

"Your dogs catch him?" the cowboy asked.

"My dogs ran him down out on the prairie," the wiry wolf-hunter agreed. He was smiling at the cowboy's apparent surprise.

"I never heard of wolf-dogs holdin' down a wolf while a man wired his jaws an' hind laigs, but it must've been thet way—'cause I never heard of a man what could hold down a wolf an' tie him thisaway."

"Well, that is what I did," Abernathy assured.

"I don't believe you," the cowpuncher stated bluntly.

Abernathy grinned. "You don't have to," he said.

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Cindy was determined to see fair play.

THE LONGHORN CHARGE

by H. Andy Huff

Everything depended upon whether the cattle would be able to knock down a fence . . .

FELIX FAREN yanked on his shabby boots, his eyes searching his apple and peach orchard. He hurried outside, anxious to see again the blossoms on his fruit trees. He'd planted them when he settled on the acre by the creek in the Texas ranch country three years ago, in the middle 1860's.

He refused to admit his fear as he ran across the clearing. Every year, free-range longhorns broke through the wooden fences and ate the blossoms and leaves from the tree branches. Although angry and disappointed, he tried to be fair. After all, he was a squatter, smack in the middle of open range hill country. He wasn't apt to forget it. Cattlemen reminded him often.

That bright May morning about a year ago, Felix hitched his suspenders over his faded and patched shirt and went to see Jim Smithen. Felix hated to see him about this disturbing business because he was in love with Cindy, Smithen's only child. Knowing how Smithen felt about him courting Cindy, Felix firmed his jaw and set forth. Smithen was a cattleman and owned some of the stock that trampled all farm crops in search for fresh green grass.

Cindy wasn't around when Felix arrived, so he got right down to business. "I ain't blaming you exactly," he said to Smithen, "but seems like the time's come when a man's got to protect his crops from wild herds of cattle."

Smithen smiled. "Reckon it's no secret how us cattlemen feel about you shirt-tail farmers squatting on our range. Hell," Smithen's heavy white eyebrows drooped farther down over his steely blue eyes, "this ain't crop-making country. This here is open range for growing fat cattle."

Felix pushed his hat back and the white streak on his forehead above the hatline flushed. "Maybe you're right, Mr. Smithen. For now. But time's coming when there won't be no more free range; when a man will have to fence his ownings and..."

Smithen's snort interrupted him. "There ain't no fence made what can hold tough longhorns in one place. Nor keep 'em out either." He stood up. "It ain't that I approve of what them critters are doing to your piddling little fruit trees, but I reckon you better figure on making a living some other way, knowing cattle like I do. Some other place, too."

Felix got to his big feet. Although he was leaner and younger, his eyes were level with Smithen's. He spoke slowly, "Mr. Smithen, I know you're laughing at me, but I got a good idea. Supposing I made a fence that would keep cattle out of my orchard. Just supposing I did; then would you ranchers let me be in the middle of your range?"

SMITHEN threw back his white head and roared. "Like I been saying all along, you farmers ain't got a mite of sense. Why, you nor nobody else couldn't never build a fence that would slow down a herd of wild, stomping longhorns. You know that!"

"I calculate I can," Felix said, his brown eyes squinting. "I sure reckon I can try. And if it works, then we can get along in peace without no trouble?"

Smithen pounded him on the back and wiped his eyes. He laughed, "You do that, Felix, and I give my word of honor you won't have no squawk from me or the other cattlemen. I'll speak for them." He wiped his eyes again, bent over with laughter. "But it ain't no use wasting your time. Best thing for you to do is pack your gear and clear out now."

"No." Felix' jaw firmed. "I ain't running. It's them cattle what will run the other way one of these days. Long's I have your word, I reckon I'll start working on my fence idear. I been pondering it some time."

"Hold up," Smithen said, his steely eyes glinting. "I got an idea, too. Saying your fence don't work, then I figure the bargain ought to have it that you'll be moving out for good. Leave the range open."

Felix threw back his shoulders. "I reckon that's a fair bargain, but I calculate on being here when you ain't." He started out of the room.

"One other thing we ought to chew on while you're handy," Smithen said, his voice hardening. "I'm sending Cindy off to one of them finishing schools for young ladies. You been hanging around her." When Felix opened his mouth, Smithen forged on. "Maybe she's took to you while she's still a

kid, but when she's finished up at that school, you won't be fitten to saddle her horse. Understand?" His voice lashed at Felix.

Felix set his lips and walked stiffly out of the room and out of the house. He heard Cindy call, but he didn't look back. One day, perhaps, he'd have money and position—but not now.

THAT WAS a year ago. Cindy ought to be back from school by now. But he pushed the thought of her aside and strode hurriedly toward the orchard. He saw no hoofmarks in the soft, rich earth. He smiled. All winter he had cut posts and worked daylights building his fence material. Whistling, he returned to his one-room rock house and eyed the odd sort of wire wound in a circle at one end of the house. That represented almost a year of work.

Felix picked up one end, inspecting the galvanized wire. He ran his fingers over the sharp nails, which were inserted in the twisted strands of wire. He had sharpened each wire nail by hand before attaching them.

Without fixing breakfast, he went outside and looked at the pile of posts stacked neatly against the side of his house. He got his shovel and started digging post holes in the packed ground. It was hard work; slow work. During the day, Smithen rode by and silently watched Felix. Finally, he asked, "What do you think you're doing?"

Felix pushed back his hat and ran his arm across his sweating face. "Building a fence. A fence," he repeated, "what will keep cattle out of my orchard. I figure on making a crop this year."

A smile flickered across Smithen's face. "It won't work."

"I reckon it will. It's strong. I don't reckon cattle will take to it; not at all."

"Well," Smithen lowered his bushy eyebrows, "when you got it all built, let me know and I'll gather us cattlemen together and we'll test it out."

"I'll sure do that," Felix promised. "And, while we're talking, you recollect what you said last year, don't you? About no hard feelings about me being here if the fence works?"

Smithen nodded. "I don't reckon we got to worry about that." He winked. "It's real fresh about your part of the bargain too. About you quitting the country pronto when cattle tear down the fence." He added, "Cindy's back but you ain't welcome to drop in."

Felix squinted, his eyes sparkling. "Sure." He watched Smithen ride off. To himself, he said, "I reckon you cattlemen sure got worries coming up though." He whistled while he worked.

BY SUNDOWN, two days later, his fence was built. Strong and sturdy, it was, and sharp-pointed to the touch. He washed up, put on a shirt he'd soaked clean in the creek and rode over, on his sway-backed horse, to see Mr. Smithen.

Cindy was sitting on the steps. Her red-gold hair glinted in the light and she looked pretty as a peach blossom. Felix thought she was sweet as a peach tasted, too, but he didn't have a chance with her. Cowpokes and ranchmen's sons courted her. He wasn't fitten. Not one of his three pairs of pants wasn't patched. Of course, his Sunday ones had just one tiny patch. And he had no money or anything else a girl like her would hanker after.

He swept off his hat. "Howdy, Cindy." He wished he'd worn his Sunday pants.

Her soft blue eyes, not hard like her pa's, looked like they were laughing at him. She stood up and Felix was starkly aware that the top of her sparkly golden hair didn't reach his shoulder. "Felix," her laugh was tinkling, "are you calling on me?"

He swallowed. "Yes, ma'am. That

is, I mean, no. It's your pa I come to see."

A shadow crossed her face. "Oh. You're the only man hereabouts who..." She looked up at him. "Is there anything wrong with me?"

"Oh, no. You're dandy in every way. It's me; I'm just a poor farmer setting in the middle of cattle country. I ain't got no education, and you've been off to school and got all polished up." He turned his hat in his hands. "Why, I reckon you can have your pick of all the men in the country."

She lowered her eyes. "You've got something they don't have. A gentleness and beauty in your trees." Then she tossed her head. "But, like you say, you're poor and butting your head against the cattlemen. Loco!" She sighed. "What do you want to see Pa about?"

"I reckon you wouldn't be interested. It's about a fence I built what's going to keep cattle out of my orchard. And it'll do it, too. I know it will. So this year I'll be having a fruit crop and making some money."

Cindy frowned. "Pa and the other cattlemen will paw the ground if you've really found something that can keep cattle out." Her eyes widened. "If you've made a fence that will do that, don't you know what it'll mean?"

Felix grinned. "I sure do. Farmers will move in. Country will be all fenced off. It'll sure hurt big cattle empires."

"Exactly. And that will cause wars and bloodshed. If you've done that, Felix, they'll run you out of the country or maybe they'll..." She turned and caught his arm in one of her small hands. "Don't do it. Leave now while you can."

His jaw hardened. "Somebody's got to do it; it's got to come. Maybe I'm the one. I ain't got nobody, so I don't reckon anybody would much care if I landed on boothill or not. Besides," he said seriously, "your pa and I made us a bargain. If the fence works, there won't be no trouble."

"And if it doesn't?" she asked breathlessly.

"Then I got to vamoose. But I ain't figuring on that."

Cindy whirled, her back to him. "You're loco. Just plain loco!"

Felix looked at her with longing in his eyes. "I know it's kind of forward of me, but I been pondering. If I make a fruit crop this year, then I'll have some money and maybe we could," he cleared his throat, "I could build another room and..." He took her hand in his. He saw that his hand completely swallowed hers.

She laughed. "That crazy fence. Don't you know you won't be here to pick the fruit—if there is any. It's..."

"WHAT IN tarnation's going on out here?" Smithen's voice boomed angrily. "A dirt-under-his-fingernails nester holding my daughter's hand!" He stared at Felix with hate in his eyes. "Git off them steps and don't never come near here again!"

Felix stood straight and tall, his eyes defying Smithen's. His voice was as steady as his eyes. "I come to tell you the fence is built. I'd be mighty pleased if you ranchers would come over tomorrow for a look-see."

"See it?" Smithen roared. "We'll bust the thing wide open. I'll send my boys to round up the cattlemen and to bring in the wildest herd of longhorns they can find. They'll stomp your piddling fence down in two minutes." His eyes bored into Felix'. "The bargain went that if your fence doesn't keep out the cattle, you'll git out and stay out of this country."

"That's right," Felix' voice was as angry as Smithen's. "And the other end of the bargain is that if the fence keeps 'em out, I stay put and have no

more trouble with you cattlemen."

Smithen hooted. "You best start packing now. Likely the cattle will trample down your rock hut, too."

Felix strode to the gate.

"And keep away from Cindy!" Smithen called. "If I ever see you together, I'll curl you up."

"Pa!" Cindy cried.

Felix looked at her a long moment before he rode off on his sway-backed mare. He carried in his heart a picture of her smiling through her tears as she waved to him.

FELIX WAS up before the sun the next morning. He checked the posts. They were firm and steady and didn't give when he pushed his weight against them, careful to hold onto them between the sharpened wire nails. Then he went inside his one-room house and changed to his Sunday pants. Carefully, he tied his black string tie and put on a coat. He was ready for the cattlemen and their wild cattle.

He didn't wait long. He saw dust rising in the distance before the cattlemen arrived. "We got a herd coming," Smithen said, his eyes boring into Felix, "what will tear down your fence, your orchard and your house in five minutes." His eyes traveled up and down Felix six feet, one inch height. "Glad to see you're dressed, ready to punch the breeze."

Felix merely squinted his eyes and grinned at the men. "We'll see. While we're waiting, I reckon Mr. Smithen told you he spoke for all of you if the fence holds."

The men nodded.

"Then I reckon you better be moving out of the way before the stampede hits the fence." Felix took off his hat. "If you'd like to crawl under the fence to my side where you'll be safe, you're more than welcome."

Smithen's brow raised. "You ain't loco enough to stand right there when them longhorns charge, are you?"

"I reckon I'm safer here than you are out there," he answered drily.

Smithen frowned. "I ain't got no love for you, Felix, but I sure don't aim to see you stomped to death by them wild cattle we rounded up. You get your horse and come with us."

"I'm staying. Right here." Felix walked back a couple of yards. "I reckon this far back from my fence is right safe."

"But..." Smithen hesitated, then yelled, "They're coming. Get moving, men!" Their horses ran at right angles away from the fence, away from the pounding feet of the maddened cattle.

Felix eyed the heckled herd, churning closer. Whooping cowboys herded the enraged cattle straight toward his fence. He spread his feet apart and fastened his thumbs in his belt, watching the cattle crowd forward, almost at the fence line. His heart pounded and his throat was dry. He felt a moment of panic. Then he steadied himself. If the fence didn't hold, then that was as good a way to go as any. He would no longer have a dream to live with.

With tails raised and horns lowered, the cattle struck the fence at a full run. Dust flew. Cattle bellowed in pain. Felix watched blood spurt from jagged streaks on the steers' flanks and legs and chest. The fence held.

He took a deep quivering breath as cowboys herded the wounded, bawling cattle back. They charged again. Felix set his jaws, sickened by the sight of the wounded, shrieking animals.

Again the cowboys herded the fierce, battered cattle back and prepared them for the third onslaught. But the frustrated, wailing steers balked and refused to hit the fence again. Instead, they fled, their tails rucked between their tails.

SMITHEN and the other cattlemen rode up. Smithen eyed Felix coldly. "I reckon you're feeling right smart."

Felix shook his head. "No. I ain't proud of hurting dumb animals; they don't know better. But I sure am glad to know I'll be making some fruit-money now."

"Well," Smithen laughed nervously, "I reckon we'd be willing to make up a purse for you if you'd be moving on anyhow. This ain't no place for orchard-growers."

"Fruit grows real nice here in the new soil," Felix said. "I reckon I'll make my own way. Much obliged, anyhow."

"Think of our side, Felix. We can't be having our cattle hurt and their hides all tore-up by that tormenting fence you got rigged there. Besides," he added, "if we let you stay, and folks see that fence, all sorts of rotten nesters will be squatting here and plumb ruin our open range."

"I calculate that's right. It's sure good land here. But you made a bargain and I aim to see that you..."

"If you're going to be ugly, I reckon you'll have to move on without the purse." Felix looked into the barrel of a forty-five. "Git moving!" Smithen ordered.

Felix stood his ground. "I'm sure mighty disappointed in you, Mr. Smithen. It ain't hardly sporting to make your word no good."

"I ain't listening to you!" Smithen directed the other men, "While Felix and me are having a nice sociable visit, you cut down that blasted fence."

Felix' face turned white, then red. "If you cut that fence, I'll..." He lunged toward Smithen, knocking the gun to the ground.

"Stop!" a voice called, "or I'll shoot! So help me, I will!"

Smithen whirled in the saddle. "Cindy! You get on home. This ain't no place for you. This is man business."

"I'm staying!" Her eyes were as steely as Smithen's. "You made a promise to Felix and you'll keep it or I'll plug you like you were planning to do to Felix."

"You'd do that to your own pa?" Smithen's voice was surprised. "You know this country ain't got no use for homesteaders like Felix here. Poor white trash without no money or..."

"But they've got faith and hope in the future. They're willing to work hard. This country is big enough for lots more good people." She added hastily, "And cattle too."

Suspicion was in Smithen's eyes. "You ain't sweet on this...this," he hesitated, "on Felix, are you?"

Cindy's eyes softened, but not her voice. Felix leaped forward as he heard a wire pop. He sprang on the man's back and they rolled in the dust. Felix got to his feet, pulling the man up with him. Holding him by the neck, Felix shot a right at the man's chin. As the tense figure relaxed and drooped, Felix let him sag to the ground.

"All right," he said, "if any of you other wire-cutters got any notions of further snippings, I'll be real proud to lay you out like him."

The men quickly pocketed their pliers. They sleepily mounted their horses.

"Come on home, Cindy," Smithen said. "We'll leave him be for now."

"You'll leave him be forever," Cindy replied, her gun still leveled at the mounted men. "And I *am* home, Felix will be making a money crop now, and..."

Felix smiled happily, wiping the dust off his face with his coat sleeve. This is what he had been hoping for three years and he didn't aim to spoil it now. "That's sure right, Mr. Smithen. My mind's set. I reckon we'll ride in to the justice of peace now." Felix helped Cindy dismount and they stood side-by-side.

Smithen's bushy brows came down over his eyes. He sighed. "Cindy's done made up her mind and she's got us covered. Never could do no more with

her than an outlaw horse." He rode off slowly, his shoulders drooping.

"Pa," Cindy cried, "we'll be bringing you over some peaches and apples one day now that we got a protecting fence."

He turned in his saddle, shaking his head. "Dernest thing I ever heard of. Putting nails in a fence. Plumb cruel, it is."

Felix took Cindy's hand in his. "We'll pick some wedding flowers off the fruit trees." He knew, in his heart, they could never be as sweet as Cindy.

The Man Who Strangled Wolves

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But Jack Abernathy *did* catch wolves with his bare hands. He had discovered how to do this the hard way—in defense of his life. One day his hound-pack jumped a big lobo wolf out in the sagebrush. They went after him like arrows shot out of a bow, spreading out in a fan to pen him in. Within half a mile, the lobo was winded; he tried to dodge and duck, but the hounds got him down. When Abernathy galloped up, the wolf had one of his best dogs down and was killing him, despite the fangs of the other dogs tearing into his thick black hide.

Abernathy flung himself out of saddle, anxious to save his dog. To save him he had to pull the wolf off the dog. Now a "loafer" wolf—a lobo—is, most of the time, a rather big wolf, some running to over a hundred pounds. He is all muscle and fangs; he can drag down a calf and with one chop can cut his throat. He can run in behind the colt, grab him by the hind-tendon, and snip that tendon with one bite. And here was Jack Abernathy, with a full-grown wolf in his hands.

The wolf forgot the dog and turned on the human. Abernathy reasoned that if he held the wolf's mouth shut, the animal could not bite him. He placed both hands in the animal's mouth, back of his fangs. This way the wolf could not bite him. With might and main, he bent back the wolf's head, tearing down on his lower jaw; and the wolf was powerless except to kick and scratch.

Abernathy had a "piggin' string" in his chap belt, but the next thing was to get hold of the rawhide thong. He freed one hand, keeping the head drawn down with the other, got the string, and slipped it over the wolf's jaws. Then he jerked back his hand, the noose tightened, and he had his wolf. The wolf fought the tough rawhide, much as a horse fights a hackamore, and he finally choked himself down into unconsciousness.

Quickly Abernathy tied the string tightly around the powerful jaws. He got some wire from his saddle and bound the wolf's legs together, much as a cowboy ties a calf at roundup time.

Then he straightened, grinning widely. His shirt was torn in a few places, and the wolf's claws had scraped off a little bit of hide, but he was unhurt. He had gone into the fight with nothing but his hands.

And he had whipped a tough prairie wolf.

"But nobody will believe me," he thought.

LATER ON, people had to believe him, for Abernathy took spectators on hunting trips. When his dogs had a wolf cornered, he would dismount, wade in, get his hands in the animal's mouth, and jerk back the bottom jaw. Then he would make his tie and Mister Lobo would be lying disarmed and evidently puzzled, if a wolf can get surprised.

Of course, he did not always escape unscathed. Many times his shirt was

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by Warner Austin

Even though he had only one eye, Big Ron Diehl was a deadly gunman. So bounty-hunter Will Marsh based his strategy upon Dielh's infirmity. . .

GUNSLAMMER'S EYES

WILL MARSH could hardly believe his luck. Still half-orey-eyed from the drinking bout he'd been on, he moved across the cheap boarding house room in his underwear. At the washstand he doused his head in the basin several times, splashed more water into his red-rimmed eyes, then faced his visitor again. The latter was a little tinhorn, a barroom tramp named Krager, an hombre who'd done time in the Big House. Marsh knew him back from the days when he himself was a deputy sheriff.

Marsh spat over toward a corner then said, "Now, let's have that again. And—straight, you packrat, or I'll nail your hide to the handiest barn wall!" He pinioned the little man by the shoulder. "If this is a trick to get a few dollars outa me—"

"No, Will, no!" little stoop-shouldered Krager squeaked, sallow face jerking with pain. "I tell you I saw him—Big Ron Diehl! It was him, Marsh. I seen him before, years ago. And I knew him. And—I swear it on a stack of Bibles—he's here—down at that crossroads place, *The Buckskin*,—

just out side of the town... Why should I lie to you, Will? I'm trying to do you a favor." He held out his hands, palms open.

Marsh's light-blue crescent-shaped eyes narrowed took on a cold glitter. He began to pull on his clothes cutting his eyes to the window and the twilight beyond. His big hands unconsciously caressed the notched walnut butts of his hoglegs as he strapped them on. He was a towering man sandy-haired with a lantern jaw and eyes that were slices of shrewdness. He was the type who could grin at a joke and wear the same grin as he struck a gent down with a Colts barrel. He'd been a tough deputy sheriff once. But he'd been asked to turn in his badge after accusations of having accepted bribes from prisoners to withhold evidence against them. Will Marsh always claimed he'd been wronged.

"Well, I done you a favor, Will," Krager whined, awaiting a handout of a few dollars.

"Maybe..." Marsh looked down at him coldly. "What makes you so sure it was Diehl? What did he look like?"

"Hell, Will, like I said, I've seen Big Ron afore. He's tall an' flat-bodied—an' he's left-handed, I noticed. An' he's got that big long nose. Then, when some pilgrim down the bar, not recognizing him, mentions his name, Diehl goes stone-faced and watches the gent in the bar mirror. See? An' he never smoked a quirly down, just taking a few puffs and throwing it away like Big Ron always did. See? It's him, Will."

Marsh plucked a half-smoked stogie from a pocket and gnawed on it. It didn't seem possible that the killer, a deadly gunslick, hunted now by the Law, would slope into a pueblo in the open. "How about his mustache?"

Krager grinned slyly. "That was what made me sure. He'd shaved it off, see, as a diguise."

THAT WAS the convincer to Marsh. That explained why the wanted man had dared to appear at a whiskey mill near a small town. He picked up his sombero, headed for the door as if Krager no longer existed.

"Say, ain't you going to give me nothing for tipping you off, Will?" the latter complained.

Marsh looked at him as if he'd spit. "I'll take care of you later, Krager. And stay outa the way now, Sabe?" Then he blew out the light and clumped down the stairs as if the tinhorn had never existed.

Marsh turned down the side street to the main drag with long heavy strides, thick shoulders hunched in thought. This was a wonderful piece of luck, to have the hairpin he and his bounty hunters had sought in vain walk in on them. But Will Marsh was neither grinning nor celebrating in advance. Big Ron Diehl was a *muy malo* hombre when anybody or even any bunch threw a gun on him. A tough trigger-slamming product of the Washita country. He would never surrender, and he'd be tough to take. Marsh, from the start, had decided the best way to do it would be to get him dead.

Diehl had done time once, had been, entangled with the Law on several occasions. Usually he managed to clear himself. He'd proven after many gunfights, often fatal to the other party concerned, that he had acted in self defense. But recently, in a bank holdup across the state, he'd gone too far, slaying a teller who didn't obey fast enough. And now they were out after him as if he were a mad dog. There were rewards totalling more than six thousand dollars on his head, the terms were dead or alive.

Marsh usually worked now as a houseman in a honky-tonk down in Prescott City. The word was that Diehl had escaped the lawman pack after him. Then an old acquaintance

from his own John Law days, an ex-owl hooter, had dropped into the honkytonk, needed some dinero, and passed him the tip that Diehl was holed up up to the north. And that he was going to try to slip through Crazy Woman Pass in a break for the Border.

Even Will Marsh's enemies had never called him stupid. They said you had to count your fingers after shaking hands with him. Some even claimed Marsh was the breed who'd stab a horse to steal his blanket. So Marsh had put his shrewd mind to work, come out with a plan. Of course, he could have and should have turned over his information to the Law. But then he'd only be likely to get a small bit of the reward—if any. Marsh didn't play cards that way. No.

Instead he'd lined up the other four, and they'd taken the trail up toward the pass to get Big Ron Diehl and the reward themelves. Marsh had been hopeful. From his past as a lawman, he had scources of information, gents inside and outside the Law who would give him a tip if they'd cut Diehl's sign. Crooks and gunslicks who'd have to talk because he held something over them. At the Pass, though, he found almost beyond a doubt that Diehl had not gone through. They passed on and to the north—spent a week scouring the country, talking to scources. Once Marsh had gun-whipped a breed half to death because he thought the hombre was holding something back. But it had been a fruitless hunt. Today they'd cut into this pueblo, Hickory Forks, ready to give up. Marsh himself had gotten orey-eyed. But now—now—

HE TURNED down the main line of the somnolent little range town, entered the dingy barroom where he'd left the other four. Leather-faced tall, lean-and-sleek-as-a-snake Tobe Powers was there at the end of the bar all right. Sucking on a dead quirly as usual as he stood staring dead-eyed over a half-emptied drink. Marsh would have bet it was the same one he'd left him with. Powers hated to do anything that cost him dinero. Powers nodded slightly.

Beside him was Little Andy with the shrivelled-up face as the result of the fact his lower jaw was toothless. He looked like an old gnome beneath his huge flat-brimmed sombrero. Nobody would suspect that he had spent years running rustled wet ponies across the Rio. He was wagging his jaw a mile a minute to the bartender, telling him what a wire-tough hombre he was.

Marsh looked around for the other two, Gunny Thomas and Samperfield. Samperfield he saw sitting at the table in the back with a travelling drummer who was buying the drinks. Big handsome Samperfield was a card at picking up an acquaintance and inveigling him into buying the drinks. Samperfield at such times always posed as a big cowman. Actually, back in Prescott, his dancehall wife supported him. Marsh's mouth darkened and d rew down at the corners as he saw Samperfield's head wobbling with that foolish grin, a sign he was fast getting orey-eyed.

Four strides and Marsh was over him. "Sampy" Samperfield looked up, and Marsh open hand smacked him over the jaw. Samperfield cursed and pulled away. He was none too nervy, but was a natural-born deadly accurate shot. Marsh called him a name and ordered him over to the bar. When they got there, Marsh called for a glass of water. He picked it up and threw it full in Samperfield's face.

"Now try to sober yourself up, you dumb gopher!" Marsh wheeled on Little Andy when the latter asked what the hell was the matter. "Shut your head. And where's Gunny?"

Andy thumbed toward a backroom

and said Gunny Thomas was asleep. Marsh said to get him. Andy looked worried. "Mebbe you better come along with me, Will." He led the way back. It was a cubbyhole where the swamper of the place slept.

Stringy Gunny Thomas lay half on and half off a messy unmade cot, snoring heavily. The room was redolent of whiskey fumes. When the coldly-angry, purposeful Marsh shook him, Gunny half opened his eyes.

"Whush matter?" he asked thickly. Marsh kicked him in the leg. Gunny yelped and sat up awkwardly, then fell back soddenly against the wall. It was plain he was too orey-eyed to be of any use that night. Marsh hauled him up by his vest front and prepared to drive a fist into his face. Then a thought, that, somehow had not occured to him before, struck him. There was no time to waste. Big Ron Diehl might light out any minute. There was nothing to keep him down in that barroom at the crossroads. Marsh walked out of the bedroom. Back at the bar, Tobe Powers asked imperturbably:

"What's the matter? You got one of your worthless tips again?" He had put up the dinero for this bounty hunter expedition.

"I just had a little parley with a gent who saw Big Ron Diehl about two miles from this spot you lunkheads! Let's ride!"

GOING down to the livery stable on the quiet street, Samperfield brought it up first. "They's only four of us now with Gunny missing." There was the hint of a quake in his voice.

Little Andy stopped walking. "That's right. Hell! And Diehl might have a friend or two along."

"Come on," crackled Marsh. "He was riding alone when they almost caught him up to the north."

But there was a reluctance now. Tobe Powers said maybe it might be better to trail Diehl for a couple of days till Gunny was in shape to fight. Marsh spat into the gutter.

"Like trying to trail a snake through tall grass. Come on!" He led the way past the little barroom next to the alley leading back to the livery barn. A man came out the batwing doors. Marsh glanced in as they flipflopped. Then he hauled up short. The stocky man at the counter in there, broad as a barn door, was Ed Fertig, a hired gunfighter he'd known years back. Ed was a cold-blooded lump of a gent who'd take any kind of a chance with a hogleg if the price was right.

Marsh told the others to wait outside. "Mebbeso we'll have our fifth man." He went in. There was only the barkeep, Fertig, and a skinny man drowsing at the bar beside him. The latter plainly had looked at the bottle too long and too well.

Fertig turned a heavy broken-nosed face. "Why, Will Marsh, you big coyote! Howdy!" He didn't smile. He never did, Marsh remembered.

They shook hands. The drowsing gent on the other side mumbled, not looking up. His sombrero hung over his eyes. Marsh refused a drink and began to speak in a rapid whisper to Fertig. The gunfighter threw away his smoke.

"You sure, Marsh?"

"Plumb positive." They talked even lower-voiced.

"Big Ron Diehl! I can hardly believe he'd come off the trail," Fertig said.

"He always was a nervy one. He knows no Law posse is in these parts." There was some haggling over Fertig's share. They finally agreed. Fertig downed his drink and they turned toward the door.

The skinny gent half staggered away from the bar and caught up with the two. "Don't do it," he whispered melodramatically. "Don't, I tell you." He gulped to straighten out his liquor-

thickened voice. "I know something. I—"

"You orey-eyed fool, get outa the way!" And the impatient Marsh gave him a shove that spun him into a nearby chair.

OUTSIDE he introduced Fertig to the rest. Little Andy had run into him before. They got their ponies from the livery barn and took the northwest fork out of the little town. A big lump of yellow moon was climbing over the hills. Suddenly Tobe Powers said a rider was following them.

They looked back. It was the little orey-eyed coot from the bar with his cream-hued sombrero, swaying in the saddle. "Who's your friend, Fertig?" Marsh asked.

Fertig said it was no friend of his, the man was a horse trader. Said he kept talking back at the barroom, saying as how he had been up Allenville way last night and that he had seen something awful. "He was afeared to tell about it, though," Fertig said. "Just a damfool idjiot, I reckon."

"Hell with him," Marsh decided. "He can't bother us."

They pushed on, going down the winding curve to the creek, wading its shallow yellowish waters. They crossed the flats beyond at a gallop till they sighted the crossroads where The *Buckskin*, a barroom that served grub to the stage passengers on the north-south road. Marsh swung them off among the sagebrush. They walked their ponies up onto the weatherbeaten two-story place. Lights shone from the ground floor windows, sprayed out the moon-dyed alkali of the trails. Behind the place a windmill creaked lazily in the soft night wind.

They quit the saddles. Marsh with Little Andy left the others and went up the edge of the trail opposite the place so as to see in the front windows. Marsh licked his lips. Big Ron Diehl was there all right with only the mustache missing. He was standing midway down the bar that ran down the left side of the interior, that put the victim's left side toward the front doors. Which made it perfect. For it was well known that Diehl, as the result of an accident in his youth, was blind in his left eye.

The pair rejoined the others in the sage. Marsh made the decision quickly for they had discussed for days just how they would take their man, depending on the conditions under which they caught up to him. It would be the old trick of staging a mock fight to divert the man's attention. Little Andy and Powers would go in first, get down to Diehl's right at the rear end of the bar, buy a drink, then get into a sham argument over a supposed card debt. Be on the verge of drawing. The others would ease in then and start the play for the deadly gunman. Except Samperfield. He would be at a side window to cut down Diehl if he should see him busting out for the front or the rear. The big thing was simply to get him dead.

"Sure wish I had another drink," Little Andy said.

Will Marsh cursed hoarsely to mask his own nervousness. "Remember what we're going to make outa this, dammit!" He shoved Andy off.

THE THREE in the brush saw them go up the steps and in the double doors. After about ten minutes, the trio edged out. Samperfield went ahead down the road, passed the place, and turned in at the other side to get at a window. Just as Marsh and Ed Fertig, loosening guns in holsters, stepped out, a figure moved from the shadows of some stunted cottonwoods across the way. Marsh snatched out one of his cutters with incredible speed.

But it was only the little drunk in the cream-colored sombrero who'd tried to tell them something back in Hick-

ory Forks. He advanced, still swaying, spoke up thickly.

"Don't do it," he began again. "I gotta t-tell ya something thash—th—thash very important. Ya donah know but Ron Diehl, he ish—"

Marsh stepped forward and smashed him one in the jaw that dumped him into the cottonwood clump again. "He must uh been kicked in the head by a horse! Come on." They went down and climbed the steps. Inside there was yelling as Little Andy and Powers staged their sham wrangle.

Marsh slid his body through the doors, cut his eyes around in a flash. There was a white-headed limping barkeep. A fat man just past Diehl at the bar. Two other customers eating at a table over at the side. Will Marsh figured it would be just too bad if some of the innocent bystanders caught a piece of lead. He himself could always explain he was aiding and abetting the Law when he chanced upon a wanted man.

"You're a dirty polecat of a liar!" Little Andy's voice bounced against the low ceiling as he waved a fist at Powers. "You lost that dinero fair and square to me!"

"You was burning 'em off the bottom of the deck last night," Powers came back heavily, hand hooked on a holster. "You tinhorn!"

"No rat can call me that!" yelped Andy. He leaped back, hand inching down toward a gun butt hesitantly.

DIEHL WAS turned a little toward them watching. And remembering that blind left eye, Marsh got his great idea. If he could catfoot up smack behind Diehl and ram him in the spine with a Colts muzzle, there would be no lead slinging, no danger of getting hurt. Even Ron Diehl would have to surrender then. He advanced softly, working out his hoglegs slowly, not wishing to attract attention by a sudden jerking motion that would be reflected in the mirror.

"I'm a-going to give you a window in the skull!" Powers was saying to Little Andy. "I'm a-going to—"

Then the voice of the little drunk bleatered from the door behind Marsh and the squat Fertig: "Don't do it, I tell ya...I know whash happened up Allenville way lash night an'—"

Maybe it was that that made Diehl half turn his head. Will Marsh, cursing under his breath, hooked up his guns, certain that Diehl still could not see him with that bad eye. And then it was like lightning out of a clear blue sky. A gun swished up in Diehl's right hand so fast Marsh could barely follow it, and the tall flat-bodied man in the rusty black was riding that trigger.

Lead ripped the sleeve of Marsh's shirt. There was a crash about the spatter of gun thunder. Squat Fertig went slamming past Marsh on the floor, part of one side of his head shot away. Steel stabbed into Marsh's left calf as he fired wildly and frantically, stunned by the turn of events. He threw himself for the cover of the front corner of the bar. Made it because Diehl, slick as slobbers, had whirled, guessing the sham wrangle between Little Andy and Powers was a trick.

Marsh knew it was play it through or die now. Once a man drew on Ron Diehl the killer didn't halt until he'd left him for dead. Marsh peeped up over the top edge of the bar, squinted through the gunsmoke as the place

reverberated with the staccato smash of the gun explosions. Then he sighted tall Tobe Powers down at the rear. Powers was pinned against the side wall, clawing at a chest rent open by two slugs dead center. And little Andy was diving for a door at the back. Finally Will Marsh picked out Diehl crouched low at the other side of the long room.

Marsh threw a shot, ducked. On his knees, against the wall, he waited, knowing Diehl would come for him. Vaguely he tried to figure it out. Yes, Big Ron was supposed to be snake quick, deadly. But this man out there was a walking dose of death. Marsh tried to pray, to pray that Samperfield would pick him off through the window. Then he spotted Diehl coming out of the smoke haze beyond the end of the bar from the other side of the room. Coming with a snaky weaving pace. And coming so damned fast!

Marsh pumped lead. He got a glimpse of a slash opened on the tall man's cheek. Then the two slugs poured into Marsh's belly, and he was sitting half propped against the bar. Like something in a distorted dream he saw Diehl whirl and jump for the front door. Marsh wanted to guffaw. Now Samperfield would cut him down from the side and—

But Diehl, sharp as a wolf, halted just inside the doors, crouched, pushed one open. Barked at the figure of Samperfield dimly visible off to the left of the place: "Shed the gun irons or I'll drill you!" Diehl had sensed the trap awaiting him outside.

And Marsh caught the thud of Samperfield's boots as he fled down the road. Then the blackness came down...

He realized he was dying when he regained consciousness. He was propped in a chair and the white haired bartender was working a drink down his throat. Will Marsh pawed at an empty holster and tried to rise before the pain in his blood-leaking guts warned him. Terror was a cold claw squeezing his heart.

"Where—wh-where is he?" he gasped out.

Somebody said Diehl had gone. His stage had come along right after the shooting. Marsh choked on the whiskey and squeezed his hands against his belly wounds hard. He still couldn't figure it out. Diehl had seen him, had even been shooting before his right eye had come around.

"I tried to warn ya, mister." It was the little drunk in the big white hat again. Only he was sobered up pretty well now.

The bounty hunter cursed him. "Tell me wh-what?"

"That that wasn't Big Ron Diehl. Big Ron died up Allenville way last night." He chattered out his story. How he'd stopped off at a deserted barn on the trail last night to bed down and run smack into Big Ron Diehl and another man there. They wouldn't let him leave lest he talk. And then, later in the night, another man, another Diehl, Big Ron's cousin, had ridden up. There'd been a terrific wrangle which he couldn't help overhearing, something over a woman. And there'd been the gunfight, Big Ron and his pard against the cousin.

"This cousin," the little gent went on "shot 'em both down dead...I saw it... He was faster'n Ron himself, so good he whipped 'em both at once. He looks like Ron's own brother, 'cept he has no mustache. His name is Elly Diehl... Dang it, mister, I tried to tell ya."

Marsh sagged deeper in the chair. Feeling the cold death climb up his body from his entrails. *And Elly Diehl wouldn't be blind in his left eye, of course,* he told himself bitterly.

"Mebbe I—I could uh got Ron—if—if it'd b-been him," he mumbled. Then his own eyes began to go blind...

Mark wasn't the cautious kind...

HOT END OF THE IRON

by Lloyd Kevin

Even a good gun fighter can find a bit of preliminary trickery helpful for setting things up.

MARK WHALEN stood six feet, two, blue-eyed, sandy-haired, and broad shouldered, with solid, rough-hewn fea-

tures as if carved from enduring heart-wood of Western oak. When Dorinda Lee slapped him with all the forceful fury of her slim and graceful arm, her fingers left only the faintest trace of reddening marks along his muscular jaw.

Johnny Haynes, Mark's close friend and cow-rancher neighbor, snorted. "Serves you right for tryin' to play the old hand-and-squeeze game with a decent girl at a country schoolhouse dance! You been away from your home town so often lately you don't recognize little Dorinda Lee since she's growed up."

Mark rubbed his jaw. *"That's* little Dorinda? Whew! Then tell me—why in blazes is she all rigged out in that fancy b a r e - b a c k outfit with the flashy spangles like a doxy from the honkytonk? How's a man to know!"

Johnny swiveled his skinny neck to stare at the slim, smoothly-rounded girl in the bright red dress with the incautious neckline and the wanton flair of skirt.

"Blamed if she don't look a mite bumptious! That's Dex Torbit's doin'—Dex likes 'em fancy. And since Dorinda's gone plumb sick in love with the man, she dresses to please."

"Plain to see where Torbit picked up his taste for style!"

"Yeah—and while you been away tryin' to run down the snaky jasper that shot up your friend Tim at the Otisville express office, Dorinda's pa went and died and left her to run the little Box-L spread all by her lonesome. So now she's got nobody to pass judgement on her riggin' and tell her right from which-way!"

The fiddles and mandolin chirped into two-step time, and laughing couples skimmed across the schoolhouse floor. Mark stared over the head of his shorter friend, Johnny.

"Which one's Dex Torbit? I figure he needs a little lesson in charity. Any man who'd stand by and let a love-struck gal doll herself up like a saloon-hustler just for him—"

"Hold on, Mark!" Johnny spread his feet to block any move by the larger man. "While you been away this here community of Big Bend has also gone plumb civil and peaceful-like. No more big fights like we used to have in the old days!"

Mark g r i n n e d. "Aw—I wasn't goin' to muss him up. Just w a n t a look at the cuss. I'll figure some way to tangle his rope."

Johnny hesitated. "Well—if you was to cast your eye down along the side of the hall to where that slim, sharp-lookin' jasper with the black hair and the gold watch-chain is makin' threatenin' motions at Dorinda for even darin' to dance with another man—"

Mark started. *"Him?* Say—Johnny! I trailed that handsome bucko three weeks out of Otisville. Figured for sure he had a hand in the e x p r e s s shoot-up. But I couldn't tie a thing to that slippery customer. So *that's* Dex Torbit!"

"That's your man. He's a cattle buyer—biddin' up stock for Morgan Welsh over at Buffalo Junction. Beef prices are up lately—he's payin' as high as nineteen dollars a head for range steers right here in Big Bend at the loadin' chute."

"Hmmm!" Mark's blue eyes narrowed reflectively. "I know Welsh—a straight dealer and hard as a frozen boot! But this jigger, Dex Torbit—" Mark grinned. "Johnny—I got 'er figured out! I'm goin' to make this Fancy-Dan sorry he ever laid eyes on little Dorinda! Maybe I can even worry him enough to sweat out a new slant on the Otisville killin'—"

JOHNNY groaned. "You don't know what you're askin' for, Mark! Dex Torbit's got more twist than a sidewinder and twice as poison. And you never see him without them two

cronies of his, Orv and Milo—them two silent, vinegar-faces between him and the door. The bulges in their coats ain't for decoration!"

Mark laughed. "I won't tangle with him. I'm only goin' to sell him some steers—that two hundred head you were good enough to ride herd on for me all last summer."

"Well, mebbe so—" Johnny still looked skeptical. "I don't want you gettin' yourself shot just when we're about to finish workin' out the partnership deal you and me been figurin' on for over a year!"

"That's the very next chore on the list, signin' the partnership papers. And that's a promise—Pardner!" Mark gripped Johnny's hand until the bones creaked. "Soon as you help me hang ol' fancy Dex Torbit!"

"If he don't hang you first—"

But Mark had already ducked away. He sauntered across the hall and bowed gallantly to a chubby, baby-faced girl with big blue eyes and taffy-blonde hair. "Miss Iris Moon—may I have the pleasure—"

Iris giggled and slipped into his arms. "You always were the polite one, Mark—I'll swear! It's good to have you home again. But I wish you wouldn't take up so much of Johnny's

Mark looked down at the lustrous blue eyes and the pouting lips. "You sure like your Johnny-boy, don't you, Iris?"

The girl blushed rosily. "And why not—I'll swear! You don't catch *him* chasin' off, tryin' to catch express robbers and all that sort of thing. He stays right home and 'tends to business. And he even helps look after his neighbor's chores, while they go chasin' around—"

Iris went on talking, but Mark had his eye on another couple on the dance floor. He swung chubby Iris through the crowd so swiftly that her feet scarcely touched the boards until he came along Dex and Dorinda.

"You know what I aim to do?" he cut in on Iris' monologue. "I figure to sell off some beef. Yes, indeed, Iris—I reckon I'll sell couple hundred head of prime steers—if anybody'll give me ten dollars a head. Got to raise some cash for improvements around the old ranch—"

Iris stared up at him wide-eyed. "Well, that's fine, Mark—I'll swear! A man has to know so much about improvements and things—"

The music stopped, and Mark escorted the girl to her chair and thanked her politely.

JOHNNY caught him by the arm as he crossed the hall.

"Hey—I heard you tellin' Iris about sellin' beef, you was talkin' so loud. Don't you know it ain't no use

discussin' cattle with that cutie doll? When it comes to cow business, she don't know which from whether! That's why I aim to marry her—won't ever have a wife tellin' me how to run the ranch!"

Mark chuckled. "You sure about that, Johnny? Say, tell me—has Dorinda got any cash laid aside since her pa's death?"

"Thunderation, no! Can't even pay her grocery bill!"

"But Dex Torbit's got his hands on plenty?"

"Sure—I heard that Welsh set up an account for him here in the Big Bend bank so he can pay off for beef in cash. Why?"

Mark grinned. "Johnny-boy—what you're about to witness is known as a financial manipulation, if it works. And they're goin' to try it—here comes Dorinda now. So sit tight and keep your eyes peeled!"

Johnny opened his mouth, then closed it. Dorinda was actually hurrying across the schoolhouse floor straight toward Mark—and her handprint not yet cooled off along the side of his jaw. Johnny backed up to lean in a shadowy corner of the wall, his honest grey eyes wide.

Dorinda's face was flushed and she bit her lips before she spoke. "I want to apologize for striking you, Mark. I'm sorry—"

Mark bowed gallantly. "Always glad to accept an apology from a lady!"

Dorinda's face crimsoned under her dark hair. "I—I heard you wanted to sell some steers—"

"Yeah—reckon I'd part with a couple hundred head."

"For ten dollars a head?"

Mark pondered deeply. "Ain't much money. But then, a year ago there was no market at all. So I reckon it'll have to do. How soon you want 'em?"

"Right away, soon as you can round them up. Maybe day after tomorrow? You can throw the herd in on my south range—"

"And you'll have the cash on hand?"

Dorinda bit her lips again. "I'll have the cash ready when you deliver the steers." She nodded stiffly to indicate an end to the conversation and hurried away. Dex Torbit was waiting for her at the other end of the room with a careful indifference on his dark and handsome face.

Mark turned to look for Johnny and bumped into him headlong.

Johnny choked for breath. "You crazy, locoed galoot—promise them prime steers, them top-grade beeves, for ten dollars—"

Mark stared into space. "Little Dorinda—she's sure grown up plumb beautiful. And what eyes! I always was a goner for soft brown eyes!"

"They ain't brown—they're hazel! And you're a locoed son of a wall-eyed nanny-goat for sellin' at boneyard prices, even to Dorinda, when I told you Dex was payin' nineteen—"

Mark closed his eyes. "Mmm—those soft white shoulders! I'll say that for Torbit, he got the gal unveiled so a man could appreciate her!"

Johnny braced his feet wide, fists on hips, and stared up at Mark. "And you're supposed to be my level-headed pardner!"

MARK SNAPPED his gaze down, abruptly sober, to meet Johnny's eyes. "You want to call the partnership off, Johnny?"

Johnny winced. "No, no—Mark! Honest, I didn't mean a thing by that—"

Mark grinned. "Come on outside where we can talk—" He led the way past the loungers at the door and out into the moonlit yard and cocked a bootheel up on the hub of an empty buggy. "Now let's do a little arithmetic—"

"I already done it—two hundred at ten dollars a head is two thousand dollars! But at the nineteen that Torbit's payin', it comes to thirty-eight hundred. A whale of a difference!"

"Yep—a whole eighteen hundred difference. That's the bait that traps the coyote."

"I sure don't follow you, Mark!"

"Look, Johnny—who's puttin' up the two thousand? You say Dorinda's broke, so it must be Dex Torbit. He puts up the two thousand of Welsh's cash and Dorinda buys my steers. Then he buys 'em from Dorinda for thirty-eight hundred—on paper. And he keeps the difference. I knew he couldn't resist a fat double-dealin' profit if I rigged it big enough!"

Johnny shrugged. "So then Dex makes eighteen hundred dollars. And you've lost half your shirt—"

"Not at all, Johnny! Not by a wagonful! Because right in the middle of the deal, I'm trippin' Mr. Fancy-Dan up short as a chain hobble. And soon as this here dance is over, I'm sendin' a telegram to Morgan Welsh at Buffalo Junction to let him in on the game."

"Whew!" Johnny scratched back of right ear. "One thing about you, Mark—when you get the Indian sign on a man, you plumb cut your wolf loose!"

"Wouldn't *you* do the same for Dorinda, Johnny? Ol' Cupid with his bow-and-arrow sure put blinders on that filly—she can't see now beyond a handsome face! But my reckoning with Dex Torbit goes still deeper than that, Johnny-boy. I still want to know what that handsome jasper was doin' in Otisville at the hour Tim Rowan was shot. And sometimes if you put a man in hot enough water you can steam off some of the fancy feathers and see what he's really made of inside!"

Johnny glanced around into the shadows to be sure they were alone. "The way I hear it, Mark—Sheriff Hank Riddle is dead sure it was Gib, the Wolfer who done that shootin'. Hank was even scoutin' the hills back of my ranch lookin' for sign of the mystery outlaw. They've posted up more reward money already—"

Mark nodded. "It had some of the smell of the Wolfer's work. Or it could have been just a trigger-happy greener. But whoever did the job, they rigged it to look bad for Tim Rowan.

[*Turn Page*]

It didn't start with a blonde and a scream in the night. That came later!

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"That's right rough on Kitty Rowan and the two kids!"

"Plenty! So you see why I can't give up the fight to nail the killer and clear Tim's name, even if it costs me my ranch—" Mark straightened abruptly. The fiddles in the schoolhouse warbled bright notes. "Say—Johnny-boy! If I keep you out here a minute longer, Iris will have my scalp. Let's get to stompin' to the tune of that music!"

BY SUNDOWN of the following day, Mark and Johnny and two hired hands had hazed the steers down out of the hills and coulees to a holding spot along the creek. They were sleek, well-fed animals and in no hurry. They drank their fill and bedded down for night.

Mark called Johnny aside when they had finished supper by the big cook-fire and the two hands had flipped a coin to determine who took on the first round of night herding.

"Well, Johnny—there they are, all ready to push over the hill onto the Box-L tomorrow morning."

Johnny nodded sourly. "Yeah—I seen ol' Dex Torbit and his two cronies, Orv and Milo, ridin' the skyline and lookin' us over. Dex wants to be blame sure he's gettin' his beef."

Mark chuckled. "I noticed 'em light out for town like they'd seen enough to satisfy 'em."

"They ought to be satisfied, grabbin' this prime stock—"

Mark lowered his voice. "But they ain't gettin' hide nor hoof of *this* beef, Johnny—because in a couple hours, about the time the moon comes up, you and Ed and Shorty are hazin' the whole herd back up the valley to that hidden gulch on your range."

[*Turn To Page* 82]

JUDO—THE GREAT EQUALIZER!

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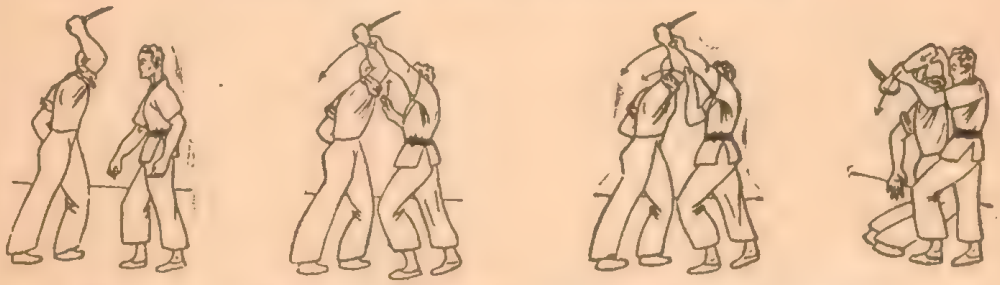

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Now I've seen everything! I'm a veteran tax accountant and naturally a fairly fast expert mathematician myself. When we audit a big firm's books, we often have as many as 20 accountants move in. And in the process we hang away at dozens of adding machines, keeping them clackety-clack-clacking till they actually run hot.

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This featherweight precision adding machine was given to a slip of a girl who had operated it for the first time just a week before. And they lined 'em up to compete against a male expert working with pencil and paper. And against two machine operators with a $150 hand operated machine, and with the most modern $300 electric!

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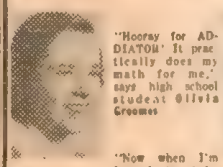

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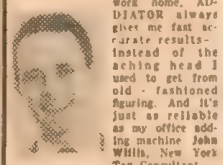

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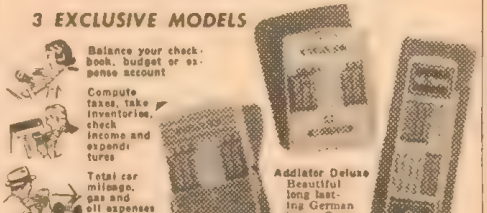

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DOUBLE ACTION WESTERN

Johnny's mouth fell open. "Hey—better cut the deck a little deeper, I don't savvy this moonlight business. Sounds a heap like plain ol cattle rustlin' !"

"What ever gave you that idea, Johnny-boy?" Mark chuckled. "All I'm after, I want Dex Torbit to draw two thousand dollars out of the bank and gave it to Dorinda. I never aimed to part with any steers. In fact, to ease my own conscience, I never even promised to deliver—I only made sure that Dorinda would have the cash ready when—or if— I ever did."

Johnny rubbed his right ear. "The game's gettin' too complicated for me. But one part I like—you ain't sellin' them prime critters for no rawhide prices."

"Not so long as you can hold 'em out of sight, Johnny. And you can count on Ed and Shorty. I promised the boys a big night in town next week for goin' along and keepin' their mouths shut."

Mark kept the cook-fire crackling and unrolled tarps and bedrolls and picketed a couple of spare horses at the edge of the firelight to maintain the illusion of a cattle camp. But when he had listened to the last rumble of the herd disappearing up along the creek in the growing moonlight, he saddled his horse and rode straight up over the hill toward the Box-L ranch house.

He crossed the hump and the mile of brush-dotted slope beyond and topped the ridge in time to see a man ride up to the house past the lighted window on the trail from town. Even in the dim light it had to be flashy Dex Torbit.

Mark dismounted and hunkered in the shelter of a juniper bush and watched the house, and his hands itched with tension. If Dorinda dolled herself up like a honkytonk hustler to please Torbit at a country dance, how would she dress to receive him as

[*Turn To Page* 84]

LIKE-NEW MOTOR OVERHAUL JOB $2.98 COMPLETE COST

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UP TO 24% Saving on Oil! UP TO 192% Longer Engine Life!

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Performs Miracles on Every Make of Car, Truck, Tractor, Gas Engine!

It doesn't matter what kind of car you own. The sensational new discovery—"Motor Overhaul"—works miracles of *instantly* greater power, performance on all makes and models!

"Motor Overhaul" is *guaranteed* to boost power 58.2%, give smoother performance—add 192% longer engine life to trucks, tractors, automobiles. Your car *must* give you greater performance or money back! Don't miss out. Order *today!*

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This car, owned by Mr. M. J. Byrne of Chicago, Ill., was using two quarts of oil every five or six hundred miles—was losing compression, hard to start, slow to pick-up. Faced with a major repair job that would cost $150, Mr. Byrne instead bought a $2.98 can of "Motor Overhaul".

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"Motor Overhaul" actually makes your car run like new in 60 seconds because it goes to work instantly—*while you drive*—to recondition your motor—to give it a tremendous new power and pep!

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Send no money. Just mail coupon for sensational Motor Overhaul. But do it *today!*

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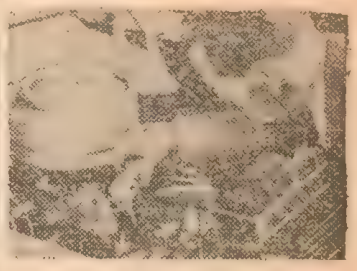
O. K. J., McMeen City, Indiana. "Instead of a hundred dollar valve and ring job I added 'Motor Overhaul'. My car runs like new."

B. F., Chicago, Ill. "I never saw anything work so fast! 'Motor Overhaul' improved my pickup and gas mileage immediately!"

C. L. D., Gresham, Ill. "I thought my car was all worn out after 60,000 miles. My car's at it going—better than ever with 'Motor Overhaul' at 100,000 miles."

F. S., Highland Park, Ill. "My car is eight years old. But so far I haven't had one major repair bill—thanks to 'Motor Overhaul'."



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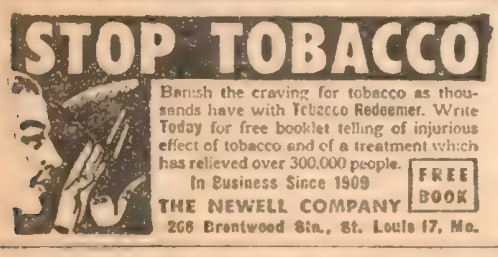
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a visitor in her own home? Just how far would a love-sick girl go? The questions burned deep as he waited an endless hour and watched the gleaming lamp in the ranch house window.

Mark cursed and spat into the dust. When this deal was over he'd show Dorinda some real, honest, old-fashioned, proper, cow-country courting!

He stood up, glaring at the lamplight. Another hour of this and he'd break in on them if it ruined everything!

But the cattle buyer was bidding farewell on the doorstep. He swung astride his horse and galloped toward town. Mark mounted and rode slowly, stiffly, back the way he had come. And he could hope that Torbit had left the money with the girl. For the success of the next tricky move depended alone on the timing!

JOHNNY RODE in before daybreak with a yawn and a groan. "This dance all night, ride all day, rustle all night—it's got me plumb wore out! But the cattle's safe."

Mark shook his head. "Still no rest for Johnny Haynes! Soon as you can eat and coffee-up, I'd like you to grab a fresh horse and ride for town."

"If this is what it means to be a pardner to you, Mark—you sure make a man earn the privilege!"

"Sorry, Johnny—I figured to go myself, but the more I thought it over I decided I better call on Dorinda instead to see if she got the money. All you have to do is ride to town and meet Morgan Welsh at the station and see that he finds Dex Torbit before the Fancy-Dan leaves town."

"That's *all* I got to do?" Johnny rubbed his brow. "Man, I'm bucklin' on my gun-belt before I ride into that kind of a set-up! I'd be about as safe tryin' to arrest that ol' lone-ridin' outlaw, Gib, the Wolfer, as to get on the wrong side of Dex Torbit and his two cronies. Just what did you say to

[*Turn To Page* 86]

Reducing Specialist Says:

LOSE WEIGHT Where It Shows Most REDUCE MOST ANY PART OF THE BODY WITH

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Spot Reducer

Relaxing • Soothing Penetrating Massage

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FOR GREATEST BENEFIT IN REDUCING by massage use spot REDUCER with or without electricity—Also used as an aid in the relief of pains for which massage is indicated.

Take pounds off—keep slim and trim with Spot Reducer! Remarkable new invention which uses one of the most effective reducing methods employed by masseurs and turkish baths—MASSAGE!

TAKE OFF EXCESS WEIGHT!

Don't Stay FAT—You Can LOSE POUNDS and INCHES SAFELY Without Risking HEALTH

LIKE a magic wand, the "Spot Reducer" obeys your every wish. Most any part of your body where it is loose and flabby, wherever you have extra weight and inches, the "Spot Reducer" can aid you in acquiring a youthful, slender and graceful figure. The beauty of this scientifically designed Reducer is that the method is so simple and easy, the results quick, sure and harmless. No exercises or strict diets. No steambaths, drugs or laxatives.

With the SPOT REDUCER you can now enjoy the benefits of RELAXING, SOOTHING massage in the privacy of your own home! Simple to use—just plug in, grasp handle and apply over most any part of the body—stomach, hips, chest, neck, thighs, arms, buttocks, etc. The relaxing, soothing massage breaks down FATTY TISSUES, tones the muscles and flesh, and the increased awakened blood circulation carries away waste fat—helps you regain and keep a firmer and more GRACEFUL FIGURE!

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When you use the Spot Reducer, it's almost like having your own private masseur at home. It's fun reducing this way! It not only helps you reduce and keep slim—but also aids in the relief of those types of aches and pains—and tired nerves that can be helped by massage! The Spot Reducer is handsomely made of light weight aluminum and rubber and truly a beautiful invention you will be thankful you own. AC 110 volts. Underwriters Laboratory approved.

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Thousands have lost weight this way — in hips, abdomen, legs, arms, necks, buttocks, etc. The same method used by stage, screen and radio personalities and leading reducing salons. The Spot Reducer can be used in your spare time, in the privacy of your own room.

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To The Man With
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Who Can Not Submit To Surgery

The man condemned to live with rupture, all too often faces a grim future.

There is only one known cure...and that is surgical correction. Yet, for many, this relief must be denied or delayed for any one of a variety of reasons. It is to this group of unfortunate persons that this message is directed.

There are two choices—to wear a truss, or not to wear one. But, since hernia never heals itself, and generally continues to become more severe, the second choice is eventually eliminated. That leaves only one question in the mind of the hernia sufferer: "What kind of a truss should I wear?" Until recently there was little choice. Most trusses all looked alike. They consisted of a leather covered steel spring which snapped around the hips, firmly pressing any unyielding pad against the hernia opening. Many hernia victims chose to be semi-invalids and risk danger of strangulation, rather than wear a truss.

Now a New Way to Support Hernia

Less than two years ago a man who had suffered from hernia himself for many years devised a new kind of support. It was so totally different from other trusses that the United States government recognized its exclusive design by granting him a patent.

Now this new device is available to hernia sufferers everywhere. It is revolutionary. There are no steel springs. No leather. No hard, gouging knobs. No unsightly bulk. "RUPTURE-GARD," as this new hernia support has been named, is suspended from the waist. There are no cruel straps, bands or springs around the hips to chafe and rub. It is as comfortable to wear as a pair of trousers—and just as easy to slip on or off.

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The broad, flat pad is molded from firm, yet comfortable foam rubber, covered on the top by strong nylon mesh for cool comfort and complete washability.

You'll like RUPTURE-GARD. If you have hernia—or know someone suffering from this affliction—won't you do yourself a real favor right now, and mail the coupon below? There's absolutely no obligation—and you'll get the complete facts on RUPTURE-GARD by return mail, in a plain envelope!

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Rush me in a plain envelope, full information about RUPTURE-GARD. I understand there is absolutely no obligation on my part.

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big-boss Welsh in that telegram anyhow, Mark?"

Mark chuckled. "I only suggested that it was time to check up on Torbit's account at the Big Bend bank. Knowing Morgan Welsh, I'd guess that he'll be in Big Bend soon as a train can get him here—which will be about two hours from now!"

When Johnny had gone, Mark dragged his own Colt six-shooter and shell-belt from his bedroll and buckled it on. And he slipped extra shells into the magazine of the Winchester in his saddle scabbard. Johnny was right—baiting Dex Torbit could become a touchy business!

Dorinda was waiting for Mark when he rode up to the Box-L ranch house. She swallowed nervously. "You've come for the money?"

Mark shrugged indifferently. "You've got it here?"

"Yes—just a minute. I'll get it—" She turned away from the door.

"No—hold on!" Mark shook his head. "I can't take your cash yet. My steers stampeded on me last night—run plumb off the holdin' ground. It'll take me a day or two to round 'em up again and haze 'em over here onto your south range—"

Dorinda bit her lips. "Please hurry. I—it means a lot to me—"

Mark rode away hating himself. If there had been only some way he could have handled this job without hurting Dorinda—even if it was for her own good!

MARK WAITED in the junipers on the ridge for an hour—two hours—two and a half. Then dust rose on the trail from two hard-ridden horses. Mark shaded his eyes and stared. One rider was Dex Torbit. And the other one—*Johnny Haynes!*

Mark fought his own impatience, forced himself to endure the waiting as the two thundered up to the house. Johnny barely paused while Torbit leaped from his horse and ran indoors.

[*Turn To Page* 88]

HERE IS THE KIND OF HE-MAN BODY YOU CAN HAVE!

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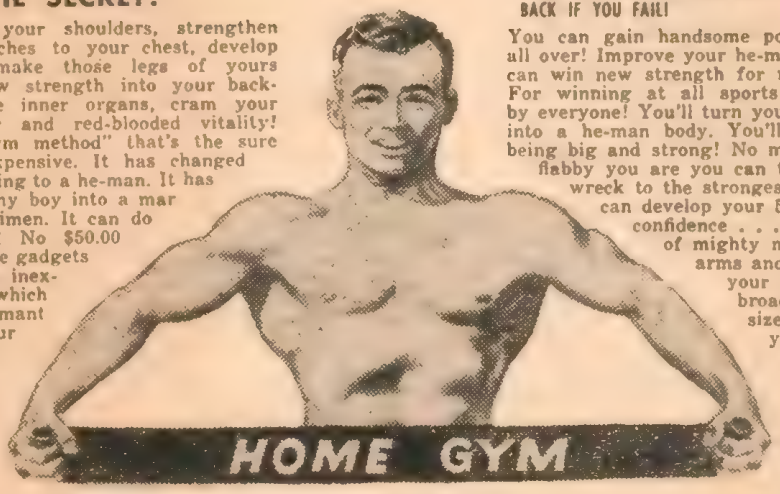
YOU CAN BROADEN YOUR SHOULDERS—STRENGHTEN THE MUSCLES THAT COUNT, IN ONLY 10 MINUTES A DAY—RIGHT IN YOUR OWN HOME—YOUR MONEY BACK IF YOU FAIL!

WHAT'S THE SECRET?

You can broaden your shoulders, strengthen your back; add inches to your chest, develop a vise-like grip, make those legs of yours powerful, shoot new strength into your backbone, exercise those inner organs, cram your body full of vigor and red-blooded vitality! The new "home gym method" that's the sure best and most inexpensive. It has changed many a 90 lb. weakling to a he-man. It has turned many a skinny boy into a marvelous physical specimen. It can do the same for you! No $50.00 courses. No expensive gadgets You simply use the inexpensive home gym which helps you use the dormant muscle power in your own body. You will watch it increase in double quick time into solid muscle. The home gym method is easy! Only 10 minutes a day in your own home! You can use the home gym method in the morning or at night for no longer than it takes to shave or get dressed—when you use the home gym method you'll be using the method used by many of the greatest athletes, used by football players, wrestlers, fighters and men who keep in trim!



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Then Johnny Haynes rode straight for the ridge.

Mark jumped out to meet him. "Hey! What the blazes—"

Johnny slid from his horse and mopped his brow. "Thunderation, Mark! You and your schemes! You sure kicked the lid off a hornet's nest this time—"

"So Welsh got there on time, did he?"

"You can bet your life he did! First off, he liked to have skinned Torbit when he found two thousand short. Gave the swivel dude twenty-four hours to make good. Then *Torbit* up and hired *me* for a body-guard."

Mark grinned. "That honest face of yours will get 'em every time!"

"And it'll likely get me killed! That Dex Torbit is the very gent you been gunnin' for—the one that shot Tim Rowan—"

"Are you sure, Johnny?" Mark grabbed him by the shoulder.

Johnny nodded. "Dead sure. I figured it was the Wolfer that done the job. But it was Torbit, all by himself. Them two cronies of his, they're the Wolfer's men. Somehow the Wolfer got wise that Torbit had some heavy loot cached away and he sicked Orv and Milo onto Torbit to ride herd on the dude until he broke down and divvied up—"

"But are you sure, Johnny, that it was the *Otisville* robbery?"

"Has t- be! Torbit admitted to me that he made a fast deal with the express company about four months ago. It ties right in!"

"And Gib, the Wolfer, is blackmailing Torbit?"

"Yeah—only Orv and Milo are doin' a little extra blackmailin' on their own. That's why Dex had to make a fast cattle deal to pay 'em off. And since Welsh broke him, that's why he hired me to keep them two apes off his neck until he could get that wad of money back from Dorinda and blow outa the country."

[*Turn To Page* 90]

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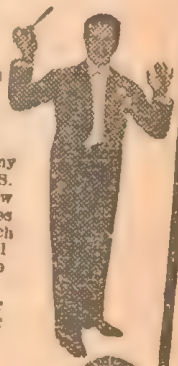

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"And his cattle-buyin' was only a cover-up."

"Yeah—to help build him a good name in the community."

"Johnny—will you make one more ride?"

"If I can climb back into the saddle—"

"Ride in to town, Johnny, and get Sheriff Hank Riddle. And you better send a telegram to the express company man in Otisville and tell him what you found—"

"And leave you here alone to handle Torbit? There'll be the devil to pay if Orv and Milo try to horn in—"

"I've been waitin' for it so long, I'll welcome the fight!"

Johnny rubbed his chin. "Makes me feel kinda low, turnin' on the dude after him *hirin'* me—even if he is a killer. Kinda wish now I hadn't grabbed the job and give him any promise—"

"Johnny—the man who killed Tim Rowan shot him down in cold blood, with his hands in the air. And he left Kitty Rowan to raise little Tim and Molly without even the help of Tim's insurance. The kids are *dependin'* on 'Uncle' Mark. Because back in our young days, you see, Johnny, when we were startin' out to be cowhands, Tim Rowan and me were *partners*—"

Johnny nodded, his eyes deep with understanding. He swung into the saddle. "I'll short-cut through *our* range, Mark—and I'll have the sher-

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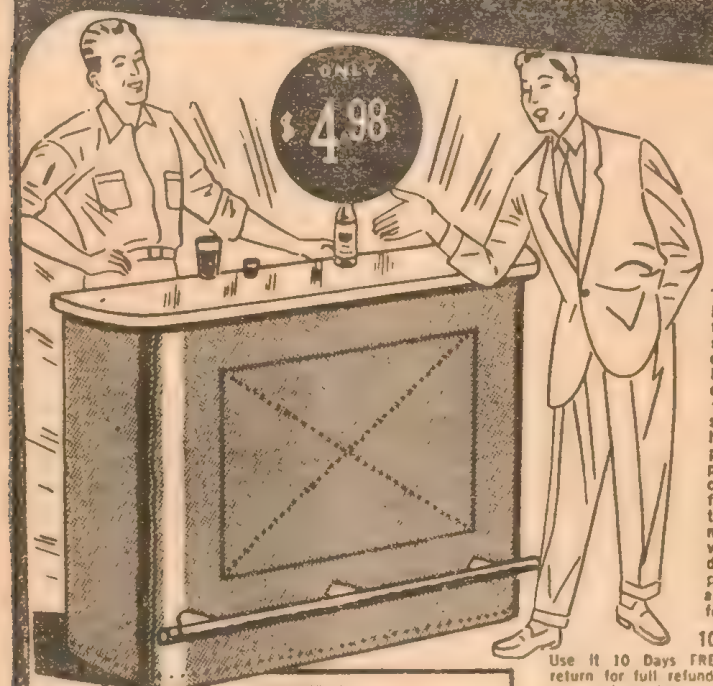

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iff back here before the dust settles!"

AS JOHNNY galloped out of sight beyond the ridge, Mark snapped a quick look at the Big Bend road beyond the Box-L ranch house. Dust was already boiling up; the Wolfer's two gunmen were on the trail of their victim.

Mark jumped to his horse. Torbit's mount still stood by the house door. Fear for Dorinda twisted a cold knot in Mark's insides, and he touched home the spurs. An open gun-fight on the Box-L was more than he'd bargained for. Putting the sign on Dex Torbit was like grabbing the iron by the hot end!

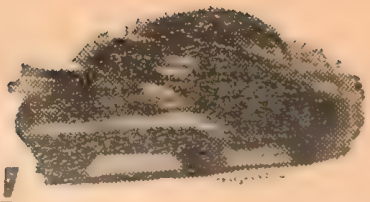
Mark rode down the slope at a reckless gallop. But the gunmen were already nearer the house. Abruptly a finger of greyish smoke appeared at the window, and a flat pistol-shot echoed against the hill. The closer saddle-horse squealed and bucked from a bullet burn. The two men reined back to the shelter of the brush beyond pistol range.

Mark pulled up sharply. Another hundred yards and he'd be running into the same medicine. But the two gunman were off their horses and firing at the house. Glass tinkled under the smash of lead. Mark choked and whirled his horse to gallop along the slope. For Dorinda's sake, he had to side the very man he hunted. He had to turn his gun on Dex Torbit's blackmailers!

He threw a long shot at the nearer of the two. It went wide, but brought a whistling bullet in answer. He tried another, and the gunman yelped and cursed and grabbed his arm. At that range such a hit was still pure luck. But he was closing the distance fast.

Then out of nowhere came a carbine shot. It crackled past Mark's ear. He swung for the brush, ducking low. Dex Torbit—somebody—had cut loose with a saddle gun.

[*Turn Page*]



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But again came a bullet. It whistled down from a shoulder of the ridge just off the Big Bend road and it burned Mark's neck muscles as it tore away his jacket collar. There was a thick greenish taste on Mark's tongue as he jumped from the saddle and yanked his own Winchester from the scabbard. The only man who would be siding Wolfer's gunmen would have to be the Wolfer himself. And the mystery outlaw had a reputation with a rifle!

Twice more Mark winced under the glancing touch of lead, and blood dampened his ribs as he crawled through the brush. Prone in the gravel, he inched forward, while fear clawed his belly, fear for Dorinda under the reckless siege of bullets from the busy guns of Orv and Milo, now pounding away unhindered.

Then abruptly at fifty yards a man's head showed—the Wolfer had also been moving forward, closing the distance between them. Mark swung up his carbine and triggered a hasty shot. The outlaw had seen him and started to duck aside. The bullet took the man squarely between the eyes. Mark stared, almost unbelieving, as the body jerked and rolled in the gravel.

He had scored a hit. Mark blinked and stumbled to his feet to turn his carbine on the other two. But they had seen their boss go down, and they were on their way to grab their mounts and stir the trail dust for far places.

ALONE IN the sudden silence, Mark turned his boots toward the house. But there was still Dex Torbit, armed and waiting, and at least fifty yards of open ground to cross.

The only chance was an approach from the blind side, ducking across from the stable to the old bunkhouse to the storm cellar. And any minute

[*Turn To Page 94*]

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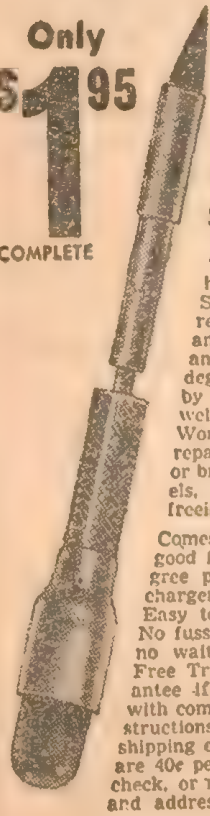

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Torbit might decide to break for the open trail. Mark swallowed through the bitter tightness in his throat and started the slow, agonizing crawl through rock and rubble to reach the buildings.

A half-dozen times bullets came so close they threw dirt in his eyes. Once lead spattered and gashed his leg. But as long as the shots kept coming, Torbit was still there.

Half an eternity later, Mark dove behind the bunkhouse. He kicked out a back window and crawled through. And he grabbed up a battered tin water bucket as he broke from the door to cover the last desperate distance to the house. He threw the bucket through the kitchen window as he passed and jumped for the back door.

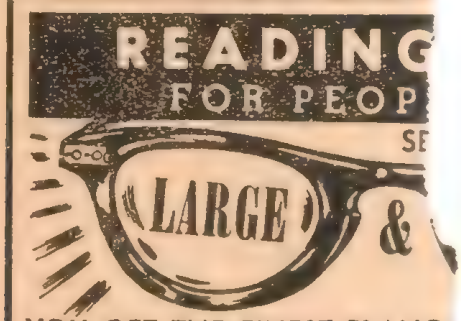
The clatter of tin threw Torbit off guard for an instant—but only a split-second. The dark-haired killer grabbed Dorinda and twisted her in front of him for a shield and threw down on Mark before he'd taken three steps across the kitchen floor.

Mark dropped his gun and dove, headforemost. Torbit's weapon flamed, and the bullet cropped off the top of Mark's left ear. Then Mark caught the man's gun-hand and the momentum of his leap spun Torbit away from Dorinda and into the clear.

Mark hit the fancy-dressed killer with all the anger of four months' waiting and drove him back across the room. But Dex Torbit was no stranger to a fight—Mark caught hard knuckles on the bridge of his nose and felt blood start, and he took a blow below the belt that wrenched every nerve in his body. Then Mark's right fist at last found the point of Torbit's jaw, and the man rolled full-length on the floor.

The fight was over. Mark tried to stand, but the sickness from the foul blow still gripped him. He sat down

[*Turn To Page* 96]



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on the only object handy—the prone body of Dex Torbit.

He was still sitting there, his stomach churning, when riders thundered into the yard and the sheriff and Morgan Welsh and the express company man tried to beat Johnny Haynes in through the back door. Johnny won by a boot-length

"Here they are, Mark! I found the express feller in town—didn't have to send no telegram—"

Mark staggered up and left the [illegible] and strode across the slope, his [illegible]gth returning swiftly with the [illegible]ement in the open air. He found [illegible] stiffening body of the outlaw Wolfer and shouldered it and carried it back to the house to dump it at the feet of the sheriff who stood in the group of men around the prisoner, conscious now, in the back yard. Mark caught the eye of the express company representative.

"Did Torbit break down and talk? Did you get his story?"

THE MAN nodded quickly. "He told us plenty! Cleared up the whole mess. Your friend Tim Rowan died a hero—"

"Then Kitty Rowan can collect the insurance?"

"Every penny—plus a donation from the company!"

Mark nudged the outlaw's body with his boot-toe. "I hear, too, there's a reward on this jigger. See that it all goes to Kitty Rowan and the kids, will you?"

Mark strode to the house. A pinto with a T-Bar-T brand stood ground-hitched by the door. It would belong to Iris Moon. Mark shook his head—lucky nothing had harmed Johnny Haynes or Iris would be after his scalp for sure!

He passed Johnny and Iris in the kitchen, the girl talking up to Johnny, anxious eyed. Johnny only nodded seriously.

Mark found Dorinda weeping quiet-

[*Turn To Page* 98]

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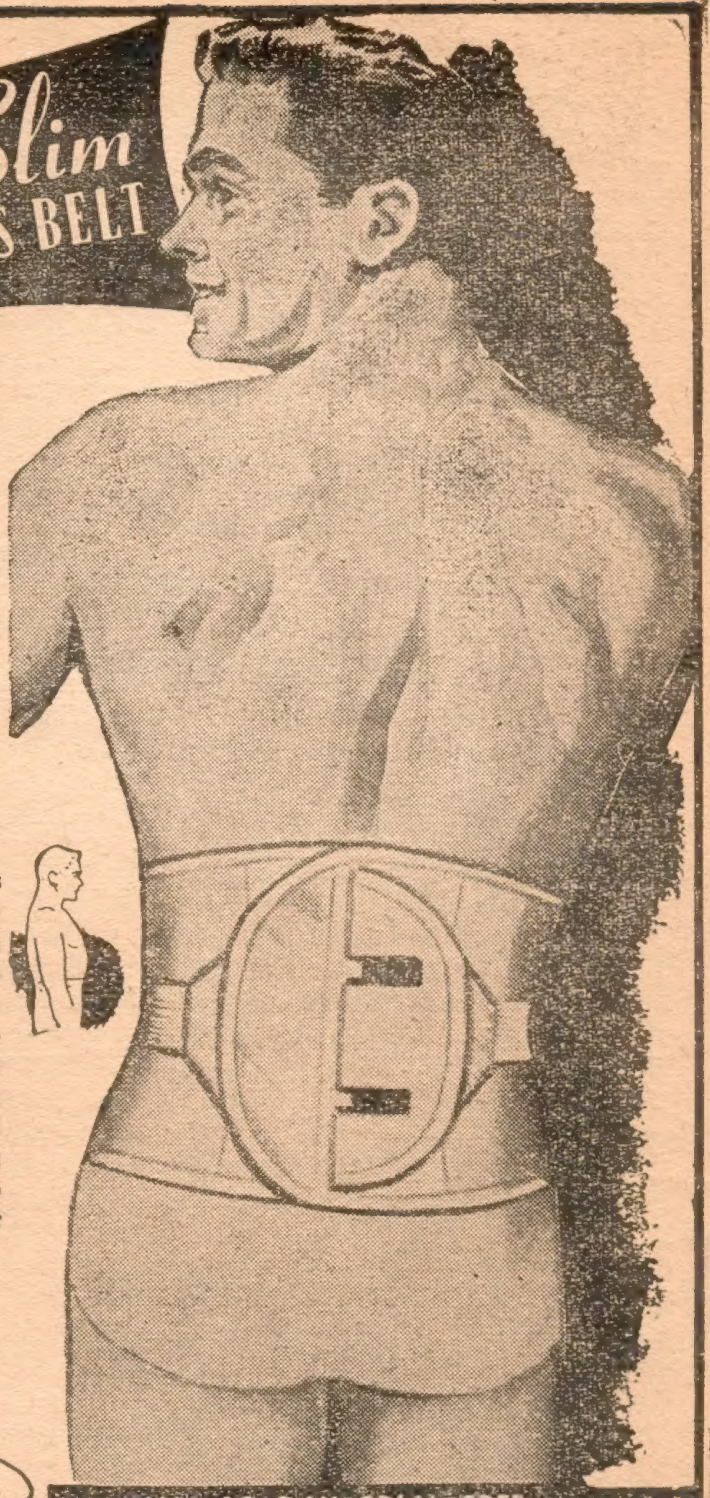

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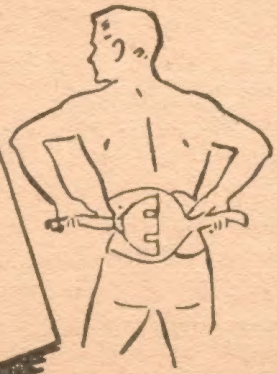

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ly by the broken front room window, sobbing against the torn sleeve of her calico dress. He put an arm around her shoulders and tilted her face up to look into her eyes.

"Dorinda, do you suppose you could ever learn to love a stubborn, rough-handed cowboy who knows nothin' but ridin' and fightin'—"

The girl buried her face against his blood stained shirt. "Oh, Mark—how could you ever forgive me for the way I've tried to trick you just to help him?" Her sobbing started afresh. "And he even tried to hide behind me—"

Mark held her close and kissed away the tears. And the reponse of Dorinda's arms and the new light in her hazel eyes gave him the sure answer he needed. After a moment he straightened and looked over her head to catch Johnny's eye through the kitchen doorway where Iris still clung possessively to the little rancher.

"Say—Johnny-boy! Maybe now we'll be wantin' to make that partnership a four-way deal!"

The Man Who Strangled Wolves

(*continued from page 67*)

torn to pieces and his ribs scratched up somewhat, but he always won over the wolf. Gradually his fame spread as the man who caught wolves with his bare hands. When President Theodore Roosevelt came West, he wanted Jack Abernathy to catch a wolf for him, which Abernathy proceeded to do, much to the President's delight and wonder.

"We're going to have our picture taken together," the President said. "You and me—and the wolf."

Still there were doubters. Accordingly in an Oklahoma town Abernathy had the citizens get a wolf in a cage. With many onlookers, he walked into the cage, subdued the wolf, and tied his jaws and legs with bailing wire. Pictures were snapped of the event, motion picture cameras put it on film, and from then on there were no more doubting thomases.

"But I wouldn't advise a beginner to tackle the chore," Jack Abernathy warned.

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